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OLD RIDDLES

THE ROCKY RANGER

OR, THE RESERVATION CASTAWAYS.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,
AUTHOR OF "TWILIGHT CHARLIE," "GILBERT
OF GOTHAM," "BLUE-GRASS BURT," "KEN-
TUCKY JEAN," "REDLIGHT RALPH,"
"AIR-LINE LUKE," "BROADWAY
BILLY," STORIES, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN UNSEEN FOE.

THERE he sat, the queerest, quaintest, homeliest old man that ever was. He was sixty-five years old if a day, although he appeared to be fully ten years younger; tall, lean, and weather-beaten, with bushy hair and a scraggy beard. He was clad in the rough garb of a hunter—the hunter of fifty years ago, and the long, old-fashioned rifle that rested between his knees looked as though it had seen active service for a hundred years at least. At his feet lay a dog, a lank and bony creature, evidently like its master—a wood veteran.

This man was Zebulon Horn, known as Old Zeb Horn; or better still, as "Old Riddles, the Rocky Ranger."

"NOW OLD RIDDLES HAS GOT YE, OLD HOWLER, SURE!" THE DOG BLINKED BLANDLY, AS THOUGH TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT SUCH WAS THE CASE.

And a good, whole-souled, hale and hearty old ranger he was—"as homely as sin," as it was said of him, "but as honest as the sun."

In his hand he held a little volume which he was diligently perusing, and that little volume was nothing more nor less than a book of riddles. It was his *vade mecum*—a book which he always carried with him for ready reference. Riddles were food and drink to him, almost, and hence his peculiar sobriquet.

It was about mid-afternoon of a lovely summer day. The old mountain tramp was seated on a projecting ledge of rock on the side of a mountain, at a point where he could command a view of a valley that lay below, and as he glanced down now and again, it was clear that he was looking for some person or persons in that direction. He seemed to be neither eager nor anxious, however, and so was enabled to enjoy a quiet hour with his entertaining book.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he presently broke out, clapping his hand down sharply upon his leg; "here is a good one, Napoleon, a mighty good one!"

The sleepy dog raised its head, blinked its eyes, yawned, whipped its tail upon the ground as though to signify that it was interested.

"Are ye payin' 'tention, ye homely howler? are ye payin' 'tention?" the old man demanded, glancing down at his faithful companion.

The dog whined, and beat a lively tattoo on the ground with its tail.

"That's right, Nap, that's right; an' now listen to this: What was th' longest day of Adam's life? Ha, ha, ha! I ruther think I've got ye this time, old fellow. Mebby, though, I hadn't ought ter be too sure o' that, fer if you could talk you would, I jes' believe, give me some cute answers. Sence ye can't talk, howsumever, I must take it fer granted that ye give it up, an' so I'll have ter tell ye. Th' longest day of Adam's life was th' day on which there was no Eve. Ha, ha, ha! that's a good one, Nap, a mighty good one."

The dog sat up, barked, and wagged its tail from side to side as though it fully acquiesced in its master's opinion.

The old man turned his keen eyes down into the valley once more, evidently saw no one, and resumed his reading.

Presently he broke out again.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he laughed, slapping his leg as before; "here is another good one, Napoleon, another mighty good one. Are ye payin' 'tention? Well, here it is: Why is a clock th' most modest thing about a house? Now Old Riddles has got ye, old howler, sure!"

The dog blinked blandly, as though to acknowledge that such was the case.

"D'ye give it up?" the old tramp asked, after a moment's pause. "Well, then, I'll tell ye. A clock is th' most modest thing about a house because it covers its face with its hands an' always runs down its own works. Ha, ha, ha!"

The dog jumped up and frisked about in as lively a manner as its age would allow, barking in a sportful way, evidently thinking that its master wanted to play a little, since he had again slapped his leg and was laughing heartily; but the old man looked upon the dog's frolic in an altogether different light.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he laughed, giving his leg yet another thwack, "I knowed that one would please ye, Nap, I knowed it would. It is a good riddle that will make a dog laugh, an' no mistake; an' that one jest set you off in fine style. An' now here's another one, an' a good one, too. Are ye ready?"

As he spoke, the old man raised his finger at the dog, and the animal stopped its capering around and looked at him.

"Pay 'tention, now, Napoleon, an' see if ye kin guess this: What part of th' face resembles a schoolmarster?"

The dog sat down, wagging its tail and evidently waiting for the signal for another frolic; an act which its master instantly misconstrued.

"I thought this one would weaken ye, my honest friend," he observed, boasting. "I thought I could give ye one that ye couldn't git away with. D'ye give it up?"

Thus directly addressed, the dog barked.

"I thought ye would, old howler, I thought ye would; an' now I'll tell ye th' answer to it. That part of th' face that resembles a schoolmaster, is th' eyelid; because it keeps th' pupil under th' lash. See? Ha, ha, ha!"

Once more the old mystic brought his hand down upon his leg with force, and burst into another roar of laughter, and again the dog began to frisk around and bark. It would all have been very amusing to an observer. Of course the dog could no more understand riddles than a recitation from Homer, and its playful antics were only in keeping with its master's humor; but the old ranger looked upon it in a different light. He held—whether he believed it or not—that the dog was in this manner showing its appreciation of the selections from his book.

When the merriment had abated a little, and the dog had settled down to await another outburst, the ranger looked once more down into the valley, and this time he beheld three men just coming into sight.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, "here they come, Nap

so we'll have ter adjourn. I'm sorry ter disappoint ye, fer I know ye're jest achin' ter hear more, but we'll have ter turn our 'tention to other things fer th' present. Come."

While speaking the old man put his book carefully away in an inner pocket, and taking up his rifle strode away down the rugged slope, the dog following at his heels.

By the time he reached the level the three men were quite near, and he went forth to meet them.

One of the three was a little in advance of the others, and as soon as he caught sight of the old mountain tramp he took off his hat and waved it and hurried forward. He was a young man, about thirty years of age, as any one would have guessed; tall and well-formed and decidedly good-looking.

The other two came on together, at a slower pace. One was short and stout of frame; his age might have been set down at any figure between twenty-five and thirty. He had a bold, almost handsome, face, but something in his expression and manner was not prepossessing. His companion, a man of fifty, was tall, well-preserved, and of a good figure. He had somewhat of a military air, which indicated the soldier. His close-cut hair was nearly white, and his mustache and imperial were quite gray.

The first mentioned, who was advancing alone, was named Philip Kingsley. The names of the other two were, respectively, Eugene Priestly and Major Arlington Kendrick.

When the old ranger and Philip Kingsley met, they grasped hands warmly, and Kingsley asked:

"Well, my old friend, what luck?"

"Had th' luck not ter break my wu'thless old, neck, fer one thing," was the reply, "an' that is about all I did have. I sartainly didn't find th' rock with th' cross on it. What luck had you?"

"Just about the same. We are pretty well tired out, for we have tramped many a mile, but not a sign of a cross on a rock have we been able to discover. Have you been waiting long?"

"Somethin' like an hour, I reckon. Me 'n Napoleon have been takin' a rest up there on the rocks. What's th' major an' yer friend Priestly talkin' so earnest-like about?"

Kingsley glanced back at the two who were coming on, and saw that they were talking in an animated manner.

"I do not know," he answered, "unless they are disgusted with the fruitless search we have had for that mysterious rock, and are planning to desert us."

This was said in a jesting manner, but there was an undertone of earnestness in the young man's voice.

"Mebby that's it," agreed the old ranger, "fer I kin tell ye that I am beginnin' ter have doubts about yer ever findin' it."

"What, are you going to give up and back out, Zeb?"

"Nary time. I'll stick to ye, young man, jest as long as ye want me ter stick. I can't help thinkin', though, that it is a wild-goose chase."

"I am sorry to hear you say that, old man, for I fear you will take but little interest in the search if your heart is not in it."

"Now that is jest where ye make yer mistake," declared Old Riddles, earnestly. "When I say that I'll stick to ye, I mean that I'll do my duty by ye an' preform my work like a man. Old Zeb Horn ain't th' man ter shirk, an' I'll do my level best fer ye as long as ye want ter stay here. Ye kin set that down fer gilt-edge truth."

"I thank you heartily," said Philip, grasping the old tramp's hand again, "and I am sure we shall yet succeed. It is not very encouraging, I admit, to search day after day and meet with no success; but we have a great deal of ground yet to go over, and I shall not give up the hunt for many a day to come."

The other two men now came up.

"Don't feel tired, do ye?" queried the old ranger, in his comical, half-humorous way.

"I should say so," vociferated the major. "I am about tuckered out. I begin to wish that rock with a cross on it had never been heard of. I don't believe there is anything in the story, anyhow."

"Same here," grumbled Priestly. "I almost wish I hadn't started out with you in the mad venture, Phil," addressing Kingsley. "I am tired of it; and I think the sooner we start for home the better."

Young Kingsley looked sorely troubled and disappointed.

"I am sorry you are getting so discouraged," he said, "but I think that when you have had something to eat, and have smoked a pipe or two to steady your nerves, you will get over the feeling, and will be ready for the work again to-morrow. Come, let's get to the camp and see what we can find for the inner man, and then while we smoke we will look over the odd document again and draw fresh inspiration from it. There is a mystery and charm about it that I cannot resist."

"I agree to all that," coincided the old ran-

ger; "specially th' first part of it. I am hungry as a young bear that hasn't been fed fer a week."

"I am with you in that," assented the major, "but my taste for this game of blind man's buff is weakening. Like Priestly, I think the sooner we set out for civilization the better."

"Well, I shall be sorry to lose you," assured Kingsley, "for if you go you will have to go without me. I shall not start until I am a great deal more discouraged than I am at present. And you want to bear in mind that, when you back out of the venture, your interest in it ceases. Come, let's to camp."

The four started up the valley then, Priestly leading, but they had not gone far when the old ranger stopped suddenly, and threw his hand up to his face. The next instant the report of a rifle was heard.

"Are you hit?" asked Kingsley, in alarm.

"No," was the answer, "but I don't want it ter come any closer. Come, dodge ahind these rocks here, as soon as ye kin git there."

CHAPTER II.

OLD RIDDLES'S CAPTURE.

As quickly as possible the four men sprang to cover behind the neighboring rocks, and Philip turned his attention at once to Old Riddles to learn positively whether he had been hurt or not.

The old ranger had not been hit, but a tuft of his beard had been cut away as cleanly as though it had been done with a pair of scissors.

"That's what I would call a narrer escape, young man," the old man observed; "a sort o' hair-breadth escape, ez it wur."

"If it had been a few hairs closer it would have spoiled your beauty, and no mistake," returned Kingsley.

"An' that would have been sartainly bad," rejoined Riddles, with a grin, "fer, if there is any one thing that I pride myself upon, it is my beauty."

This created a smile all round, for, as has been said, the old fellow was decidedly homely.

It was no time for joking, however, and Kingsley inquired:

"Have you any idea where that shot came from, Zeb?"

"Only a general idee, from th' direction it kem," was the reply. "It kem from th' opposite side o' th' valley, over thar, I should say," pointing.

"And if we show our heads again we are likely to get another call from the same quarter, eh?" ventured the major.

"Jest so; an' about th' most healthy thing we kin do is not ter show ourselves fer some time, I should say."

"Then have we got to stay right here and swelter in this hole till dark?" demanded Priestly.

The ranger looked around before he ventured to reply.

"No," he answered, "I reckon we kin sneak out o' here if we use a leetle care. But, that don't jest suit my idee. I would like ter find out who it was pitched that chunk o' lead at me, an' what he did it fer. When a man goes ter makin' himself so familiar wi' me without any reglar interduction, I gen'ly want him ter 'low me ter interdoose myself ter his notice."

"How can you learn who it was, though?" asked Kingsley. "You certainly cannot venture over there, for if he wants your life it would be running right into the very jaws of death."

"It wouldn't be th' fu'st time that I have been right inter them same jaws, not by a good many," was the reply. "I have sported wi' th' specter a good many times in my career, an' I 'spect ter have a good many more tussles with him afore he downs me."

His three companions laughed.

"I see you are something of a punster, as well as riddle-maker," remarked Kingsley.

"Mebby so, mebbly so," returned the old man, "but I ruther think they come by accident. They don't 'mount ter much, anyhow. My puns an' conundrums is gen'ly like a chatterin' cage—or rather a cage o' chatterin'—parrots."

"Why, how is that?" asked Priestly.

"Because they are far-fetched an' full o' nonsense," was the sober answer.

This created another ripple of merriment.

"That is not a bad one," complimented Kingsley, "considering the fact that you have just had a narrow escape from death."

"An' that reminds me that I must lose no time if I want ter find out who that rascal was that fired at me," averred the old man; "he may sneak 'round ter some other p'int ter take another pop at us. You fellers wait heur till I git back, an' then we'll see what is ter be done about it."

"Where do you mean to go?" inquired Kingsley.

"Why," was the reply, "I mean ter sneak 'round ter where th' shot kem from an' see what I kin see. I won't be gone long, unless I git popped over, an' I'll try ter keep my eyes open so's not ter give th' p'izen critter a chance ter have that pleasure."

"Well, go ahead," assented Kingsley, "for there is no use telling you not to go; and if you

want help, just shout for it and we'll be on hand."

"All right. Keep th' dog heur with ye, fer he will lead ye ter where I'll be, in case anything happens ter me."

Taking a firm hold upon his rifle, the old tramp got down upon his hands and knees and began to crawl away, keeping the rocks between him and the point from where the cowardly shot had come. In this manner he proceeded for some distance, until he reached another clump of rocks and bushes, and there he changed his course and headed across the valley and was soon lost to sight.

"There is something of a mystery about that shot," observed Kingsley, when Riddles could no longer be seen. "He or we must have an enemy somewhere around here."

"That is about the way it looks," agreed the major. "It was bad enough when we had no one around us; but, now that we have enemies near at hand, I am for getting out of here as soon as we can and striking for home."

"My idea, too," seconded Priestly. "It is getting too interesting to suit me."

"Perhaps we are not the only ones who are looking for that mysterious rock," ventured Kingsley, "and it may be that others have found it and want to scare us out of their way."

"All the more reason why we should be going, then," persisted Priestly. "I am in no mood to dispute the ground with them."

"The same here," vowed the major. "I want to go home with a whole skin, and the surest way to keep it whole is to get out of this wilderness with all haste."

"Say, what has come over you two?" Kingsley demanded. "Until to-day you have both been with me in earnest in the search, and now all of a sudden you both decide to throw the thing up and leave me to carry it out alone. Is there anything back of it all?"

"There is nothing but common sense back of it," answered Priestly. "We have stood by you until patience has ceased to be a virtue, and now we have decided to get out of the hills as soon as we can."

"Well," responded Kingsley, "I don't want to keep you here against your will, but, at the same time, I do not know how you will find your way back to our starting point without a guide, for Old Riddles has promised to stay and see me out, through thick and thin. What you can do out here with no one to show you your way, I fail to see."

If Kingsley had been looking at his two companions as he spoke, he would have noticed that they exchanged a meaning glance. That is to say, he would have caught them in the act if he had looked up at the right moment. As it was, he was unaware of anything of the kind being done.

The conversation ran on for some time, until it was suddenly interrupted by the report of a rifle.

"Ha! that is the same rifle that cracked before, unless I am greatly mistaken," quickly observed Kingsley. "I hope no harm has come to Old Zeb."

As he uttered the words he sprung to his feet and looked in the direction from which the sound had come.

Nothing was seen save a little cloud of smoke that went curling up toward the clouds, and not a sound was to be heard.

Priestly and the major too, were upon their feet instantly, and all three left the shelter of the rocks and stepped out into plain sight. They thought not of the danger, for they knew what their duty was if Old Riddles was in trouble, hurt or dead. Nor could they well have held back even if they had been inclined to do so, for Philip Kingsley quickly urged them to action.

"Come!" he exclaimed, "we must act! Get hold of your weapons and let's make a dash over there and see what is going on. We will keep apart, and our chances of getting hit will be lessened. Come."

Away Kingsley dashed, and the others and the dog were not far behind him. And they ran right across the valley in plain sight, taking the chances of being shot down at any moment by their unseen enemy.

Before they had gone half-way across, however, they heard the voice of the old ranger calling to them.

"Come right erlong, boyees!" he shouted, "fer I have got th' p'izen critter dead ter rights. Come right erlong an' see him. He's a beauty, an' no mistake 'bout that. He tried ter git another crack at me, but I got th' best of him, an' now he is here on exhibition, free gratis fer nothin'."

The three men hastened forward, and soon came to the place where Old Riddles was awaiting them, when they saw for themselves that he had indeed captured a man.

"Thar he is!" said the old fellow, keeping the assassin covered with his trusty rifle; "an' what d'ye think of him?"

The prisoner was a villainous-looking man, whose expression was dogged and determined. His rifle was lying upon the ground near to where he was standing, and he was glaring at the old ranger with vengeful eyes.

"Are you sure he is the one who fired at you?" inquired Kingsley.

"You bet I am! I caught him right in th' act o' tryin' ter pop me over. But, th' p'izen critter won't talk."

"Won't talk?"

"That's what I said. He won't open his head at all. Ye see I got my eye onter him an' sneaked up abind him while he was a-watchin' th' rocks over thar ter git a crack at us again, an' so I got th' deadwood on him. I made a noise, an' then dodged abind a rock afore he could git a bead onter me. Purty soon I put my old cap onter a stick an' poked it out inter sight, an' hang me if he didn't drill a tunnel through it afore I could wink. That was jest what I thought he would do, an' so I steps out an' invites him ter h'ist his hands, which he did without delay. An' now we have got ter make him talk if we have ter saw off a leg or two fer him."

"See here, you scoundrel!" warned Kingsley, "if you know when you are well off you will open your head and give an account of yourself. What did you fire at us for?"

The man made no response but stared at them in stolid silence.

"That is what I call 'zasperatin'!" declared Old Riddles. "I have a notion ter let daylight inter his homely kerkiss, sure's ye live. Shall I do it?"

"No!" decided Kingsley; "we can find some way to make him talk. We will take him with us to camp, and then if he won't answer our questions it won't take long to hang him."

"That is ther idea," agreed the old ranger, "an' that is what we will do with him. Here, take these strings an' bind him up in such a way that he can't use anything but his feet, an' then we'll paddle him off ter camp in short order."

Kingsley and Priestly soon had the fellow securely bound; then the old ranger ordered him to move forward. But the man would not move.

"Ha!" Riddles exclaimed, "can't walk nuther, eh? I think I kin help ye in that, stranger; I do, by hokey!" and, as he spoke he drew his hunting-knife from his belt and gave the fellow two or three sharp prods behind, thus starting him off with a howl.

"Thought I could move ye," he chuckled; "an' now you want ter keep right on movin' till we tell ye ter stop." —

CHAPTER III.

PECULIAR DOCUMENTS.

PHILIP KINGSLEY and Eugene Priestly were cousins, but cousins who had never known each other until within the year previous to the time of this romance.

It is necessary to pause here and give a few words of explanation concerning them and what had brought them to the West.

The parents of both were dead, and now they were the only kinsmen of a once numerous family.

Kingsley had been born and reared in Ohio, while Priestly was from the State of New York. The last one of their relatives to die had been an uncle, who had died in a far Western city about six months prior to the time of which we write. This uncle had left a considerable fortune, divided equally between his two nephews.

Finding that it was necessary for them to go West in order to have the estate rightly settled, Priestly had joined Kingsley at his home in Ohio, and they had set out together.

When they reached their destination they found that the lawyer in charge of the matter had everything in readiness, and as soon as they had given sufficient proof of identity, they were put in possession of the property.

A sealed box had been left by the uncle to be delivered to the elder of the two heirs, to be considered as his property and by him to be opened.

This box fell to Kingsley.

When he opened it, in the presence of Priestly, he found it to contain two letters, and a parchment document in a worn and battered copper envelope.

The first of the letters read as follows:

"TO MY ELDER NEPHEW:—

"In this brief letter—which, as you have seen marked upon the outside, I desire you to read first on opening the box—you will find laid down the conditions upon which you are, or are not, to read the other letter and the document in the copper envelope. Of course they are here for you to read if you disregard my instructions, but I trust that you have honor enough to accept the conditions, which are not grievous. *First*—You are to read the second letter in the presence of your cousin, with no third party present. *Secondly*—You are to decide then and there whether you will or will not undertake the work. If you accept, you are then at liberty to go on and read the parchment document, on these conditions: You are first to ask your cousin if he, too, is willing to undertake the work, and if he is, you and he are to work together, sharing equally the result, whether it be fortune or failure. If he is *not* willing to go into it with you, then you need not let him see the parchment document at all, but keep it for yourself. *Thirdly*—If you do not accept, then you are to turn the document over to your cousin, provided he is willing to undertake the work, and in this event, you are not to read the document at all. This done, he will assume possession of the secret

and proceed with his task. *Fourthly*—If neither of you is willing to accept, which I do not for a moment think likely, you are to turn the box, with its contents (the document, unread,) over to my friend, Major Arlington Kendrick.

"Very truly yours,

"SANFORD KINGSLEY."

"What do you 'think of it?" Kingsley asked, when he had finished reading the letter.

"It is a great mystery," Priestly replied, "and I'm anxious to hear the other letter read."

"I will read it at once," decided Kingsley, "as the conditions are complied with. That is, no one is present but you and me."

With this, the elder cousin broke the seal of the second letter and read:

"TO MY NEPHEW:—

"If you are about to read this without complying with the condition set down in the other letter, let me urge upon you to pause, consider that your honor is at stake, and proceed no further until that condition has been filled.

"Twelve years ago I traveled by trail from Santa Fe, N. M., to Denver, Col. One day I saw, and picked up, a peculiarly shaped and folded piece of sheet copper. At first I was tempted to throw it aside, after a casual glance, but on looking at it more closely I was struck by its resemblance to an envelope. A more careful examination convinced me that it was an envelope, and that it contained something in the manner of a letter or document. The envelope had been bruised and battered by the hoofs of horses that had passed over the trail since it had been dropped there, but I took pains to straighten it out as much as possible before proceeding to open it, and when I had done so I found that it had been addressed to some one. The directions it bore are almost obliterated, but some of the letters are still readable, as you will see when you come to look at it. Opening it, I found it to contain a parchment document, and that document of a most peculiar nature. It had been written by a man who was near his mortal end, and who had no hopes of reaching any human habitation in time to deliver it to one of his kind, personally. I have read the document, but I do not want you to do so unless you are willing to take upon yourself this obligation: That you will follow the instructions given in the letter, and undertake to carry out the dying man's wishes. In order not to require you to take the step entirely in the dark, I will give you an idea of what is before you. The man had discovered a vast treasure, but knowing that he must die, he could make no use of it. The document gives directions how to find the place where the treasure is. You are to go and secure it, take one quarter of it for yourself—or selves—and then you are to search for the dead man's heirs and deliver the other three quarters to them. Owing to ill-health, I have never been able to undertake the task, and now I leave it to you, hoping that you will carry it out in an honest and creditable manner. You are to decide upon this before you read the document. I trust—indeed I feel sure—that you will accept the task. If you would take a third party into the work with you, I can recommend my friend, Major Kendrick, who has had some experience in the West, and who, I am satisfied, will be only too glad to join you.

"Very truly yours,

"SANFORD KINGSLEY."

"Well," asked Priestly, when Kingsley had read to the end, "what do you think of it now?"

"It is as fascinating as a romance," was Kingsley's comment.

"Shall you undertake the work?"

"I certainly shall. Will you join me?"

"Yes, you may count me into it."

"That is settled, then, and we are at liberty to go on and read the mysterious parchment document."

As he spoke, Kingsley took up the worn and battered copper envelope and looked it all over carefully. It was about six inches long by four in width, was—or had been—carefully folded, and had been sealed with solder or tin-foil. Only very little of its original direction could be seen now, and the following will give an idea more clearly than words of description could do, of what remained:—

The fin * * * ease
deliv * * * son
to w * * * ssed
Mrs. Cl * * * on,
or, De * * * nt,
* * * n,
* * * a,

Such was all that was left of the superscription. The letters were bold and plain, having evidently been made by stamping with some rude instrument, but the hoofs of horses, or more probably the wheels of a stage or wagon, had entirely blotted them out in two places, as shown.

The two young men spent some time in trying to make something out of the detached words, and at length succeeded in framing what was evidently the correct solution of the first part of the writing, as follows: "The finder of this will please deliver it to the person to whom it is addressed."

"This is certainly the way it has read in the first place," argued Kingsley, as soon as they had arranged the words, "for you see the space is just about large enough to admit the words we have supplied, and no larger."

"That is true," agreed Priestly, "and now let's see what the document is; for there is no use in our trying to decipher the direction."

This was clearly evident, as a glance at it will show, so they gave it up and Kingsley drew forth the parchment which the envelope contained.

It was old and soiled, and in some places quite faded and dull, while here and there the ink—if ink it had been—had the appearance of blood. It read as follows:

"MOUNTAINS OF SOUTHERN COLORADO,
(OR NORTH NEW MEXICO),
July 21st, 1866."

"MY DEAR WIFE:—

"I feel that I shall never see you in life again. I have at last found the treasure for which I set out in search, but yesterday I met with an accident—a fall—which will prove, I fear, speedily fatal. My back is injured so that I cannot walk, and the dreaded mountain fever is coming upon me. It is with every prospect of certain death before me that I write these lines. When I have done, I shall strive to crawl out to the nearest trail and there leave, in a copper envelope, this letter, hoping that the first person to pass along will find it and send it to you. I will here bid you an affectionate last farewell, fearing that my strength will fail me even before I can write all that it is necessary I should. We shall meet above."

"Now to direct, as briefly yet as clearly as possible, how to find the place where this treasure is concealed, and where, if I have the strength left to crawl back here again, my bones will be found. You are to place the map and directions into the hands of some one whom you can trust, and when that person has done his work, and my bones have been laid to rest, he is to have one quarter of the treasure as his reward. If he proves false to his trust, let him tremble. He shall know no peace by night nor day, for I will haunt him to the end of his life. Therefore, let him consider well before he undertakes the task, and say whether he will prove an honest man or a traitor; for if he finds the treasure he will be tempted as he never was before. This map is not quite accurate, as I have found, but I will explain the faults so that it will not puzzle another as it did me. Instead of three mountain peaks in sight, there are four, and it is from the fourth one, the one not represented on the map, that the count is taken. I cannot see how such a mistake was made, for, to follow the map as it is, no one would ever find the rock with the cross on it. I followed the map until I knew that it was false, and then I went to the other mountains and started from them, working upon the same directions, and I have found that the fourth, the one not down on the map at all, is the right one to proceed from. It may be that this was done purposely by the man who made the map. The place cannot be mistaken, for it is the only place within hundreds of miles where four tall peaks stand so near together; and it may be easily recognized by the fact that one of the peaks has a flat top, while the other three are very sharp. It is the one with the flat top that is not set down on the map. From that mountain the searcher must set out toward the north, keeping in direct line with two of the other peaks, and by following then the directions of the map carefully, he will surely find the rock of the cross. From the rock of the cross to the cave where the treasure is hidden, the direction given in the map is again at fault. Climb to the top of that rock, or gain that point by going around, and from there pace fifty full steps directly toward the mountain from which the start was made. There, five stones will be found in a pile. At that point turn and face the mountain on the east, proceed twenty paces further, face the mountain on the south, and proceed then until a rock bars the way. From that point the map is accurate, and the rest is easy. I can write no more, but must hasten to prepare the envelope for this. If I fail to get out to the trail, this may never reach you, but if I do not fail it surely will, provided it falls into the hands of a man who has a spark of manhood's honor in him. And now to the finder, if he has opened and read, let me add this: If you play false to the trust that has fallen to you, beware! for you shall know no peace this side of the grave. Be true, and—"

There the document abruptly ended.

"Go on," urged Priestly, "and read the rest of it."

"There is no 'rest' to it," answered Kingsley. "That is the end of it."

"The end of it! Where is the map?"

Kingsley turned the parchment over and looked on the other side, but the map was not there, nor was the continuance of the letter.

"We have it all," he declared, "and we must make the most of it. It is—Ha! here is something on the back of one of the other letters."

Catching up one of his uncle's letters he quickly read a few words that had been written in pencil on the back of it.

"What is it?" asked Priestly, eagerly.

"Only a few words by uncle," explained Kingsley. "He says that this one page was all there was in the envelope when he found it, and he thinks that the map and the other page of the letter have been left out by mistake."

"Not much to be wondered at," Priestly commented, "considering the state the man was in when he wrote it, but it is mighty tantalizing for us. Are you going to undertake the work?"

"We settled that point before we read the document," was the reply. "I shall most certainly undertake it."

Further debate and deliberate consideration fully settled Philip Kingsley to the task, and his cousin entered into the spirit of the thing with a will. They hesitated, however, about setting out alone, not having had experience in the Western wilds, and at last they resolved to invite their uncle's friend, Major Arlington Kendrick, to join them. The major was willing, and in a few weeks they were ready for their work. They went to Denver, and from there to one of the southern outposts of the State, where they had the rare good fortune to secure for their guide no less a personage than Old Riddles, the Rocky Ranger.

CHAPTER IV.

THE RESERVATION CASTAWAYS.

A SAD, tired, disgusted, and disheartened group it was, of a verity.

There were four men and four women in the party, and we will proceed to introduce them without delay.

The men were named Edgar Woodland, Walden Terrill, Barrington Duff, and Socrates Sniffin; the women, Emma (Mrs. Edgar) Woodland, Olivia Vane De Vere, Blanche Drayton, and Deborah Flint.

Edgar Woodland was a man about forty years of age, and Mrs. Woodland was about thirty-five. Miss De Vere, their ward, was nineteen. The Woodlands were wealthy, and their ward, too, had a considerable fortune awaiting her when she came of age. Blanche Drayton's age was twenty-two. She was an orphan, and not by any means wealthy, yet she had a sufficient income upon which to live, by exercising a little economy. Deborah Flint was Miss Drayton's companion. She was about forty-eight, and had never married. She had been Blanche's mother's companion, before her marriage to Horace Drayton, and had never left her, as she had no home nor relatives of her own. When Mrs. Drayton died, which was when Blanche was about ten years old, Miss Flint promised her that she would devote her life to Blanche; and so she was doing.

Blanche Drayton and Miss De Vere were friends, having been acquainted at a boarding-school some years previously to the time of our story. Blanche's education was limited to what she had acquired at the mentioned school, while Miss De Vere's was, in her own estimation, unlimited; she having passed through one of the Eastern colleges with flying colors. The two girls were not at all alike, for while Blanche was sound, sensible, practical, and matter-of-fact in everything, Olivia was airy, proud, vain, and fond displaying her learning; but Blanche had not been blind to the fact that Olivia had a tender and loving heart, despite her faults, and hence their friendship. Olivia's hobby was German literature, and she dished it up to her friends on every possible occasion free of charge.

Walden Terrill was a man of thirty, good-looking and pleasing in manners, and claimed to be wealthy. Mr. Woodland had made his acquaintance at Denver, and, after as far as possible satisfying himself that he was what he pretended to be, had asked him to join his party.

Of the other two men, Barrington Duff was a corn-doctor and Socrates Sniffin was a drummer—or, as he put it—"a commercial traveler."

The Woodlands were from Virginia, and another hobby of Miss De Vere's was that she had the blue blood of the "F. F. V." in her veins. Miss Drayton was from Indiana, and had met her school-day friend by chance at Denver.

Mr. and Mrs. Woodland, and their ward, were "doing" the West, preparatory to spending the next summer in Europe. Mr. Woodland was a man of sound ideas, and he did not think it the right thing to do to go abroad to see the world before he had seen the world at home. Blanche Drayton was at Denver partly for pleasure and partly on business. When she and Miss De Vere met, the latter was resolved that Blanche and Miss Flint should join her guardian's party, as they were about to set out on a tour by trail down into New Mexico and Arizona.

At first Blanche would not hear to this, claiming that she could not possibly do it; but Mr. and Mrs. Woodland, too, were so persistent in their invitation that at last she promised to go with them.

Mr. Woodland had declared that he had not come to the West to ride around on the railroads, but wanted to have a taste of the old-fashioned way of traveling. With this in mind he had, with the assistance of Walden Terrill, engaged a guide, and was then about ready to set out.

Barrington Duff and Socrates Sniffin, learning what his intention was, and having made his acquaintance at the hotel where they were all stopping, had asked permission to join him—a request which had been granted.

Their guide, who had been introduced and recommended to Mr. Woodland by Walden Terrill, was one Dave Warden, better known as "Utah Dave." He was about thirty-five years of age, and claimed to know the West thoroughly.

Of course Mr. Woodland made some inquiries about him, and was satisfied, from what he could learn, that he was a good guide and an honest man.

Such was the reputation the man had, but, as we shall learn, he did not deserve it, for he was at heart a rascal.

The party set out, and for some time all went well with them, except that their camp-cook early deserted them.

Each person had a good horse, and they had, besides, pack-mules to carry their baggage.

With this introduction and explanation of their aims and intentions, let us hasten to tell how they came to be the sad, tired, disgusted and disheartened party we now find them.

One morning, about two weeks after the time of their starting from Denver, they awoke to the fact that their guide was not in camp with them. At first it was thought that he had merely gone out to procure something in the way of game; but when noon came and the guide did not, then it began to take on a serious aspect. In the afternoon the men of the party set out to look for him, thinking that some accident had happened to him, but he could not be found.

Night came on, and still he did not return; nor did he make his appearance at all, although the party waited for him three days.

On the morning of the fourth day Mr. Woodland called the men of the party together, and put the question to them:

"What are we going to do?"

Barrington Duff and Socrates Sniffin were for going back to Denver, but Walden Terrill was for pushing on. He argued that they would sooner or later come to some settlement where they could procure another guide, and that a settlement would in all probability be reached sooner than they could possibly reach Denver. As for a rough trail ahead, it could not well be worse than the one over which they had come thus far.

The ladies, too, had a voice in the matter, and they were of the opinion that the argument of Mr. Terrill was sound, and they were for going on.

When all had had a chance to express their ideas on the subject, however, it was left with Mr. Woodland to decide, all agreeing to abide by his decision.

"Well, then," said he, "we will go on. We have plenty of provisions, plenty of arms and ammunition, and plenty of health and strength. It will be no more of a hardship for us to push on than it would be to turn and retrace our steps."

So the question was settled, and they broke camp at once and started on their way.

Walden Terrill claimed to have been over the same trail some years previously, and Mr. Woodland put everything into his hands, since neither himself nor any of the others could lay claim to any knowledge whatever of the sort necessary to help them out of their present difficulty.

Thus they pushed on, southward, for several days.

Late one afternoon, when they were all tired out and were looking about for a favorable spot where they might go into camp for the night, they were suddenly confronted by a band of masked men.

"Hands up, all around!" was the order; and as the party was at a great disadvantage, the order had to be obeyed.

The masked men were terribly rough-looking fellows, so far as their dress and appearance went, and there were about ten of them in number.

"What do you want?" demanded Woodland.

"Nothin' that we can't git away with," was the grim response.

"Do you mean to rob us?" Woodland asked, now in real alarm, as he thought of the ladies of the party, and how helpless they would be without their horses.

"That is about th' size of it, mister," was the answer, "an' if you go ter cut up any tricks we may do wuss'n that."

"I will not submit to it," the master of the party grated. "I will—"

"There is no use in trying to fight them," cautioned Terrill, "for they are too many for us, and they would hold our lives of no value whatever. If we get off with our lives let us be thankful."

"That is jest whar you show hoss sense," observed the leader of the band. "I tell ye we are terrors when we are on th' road, an' th' best thing that you kin do is ter take it easy. Come, now, git down off o' them hosses, every one of ye."

"Surely you will not deprive the ladies of their horses, will you?" Woodland inquired.

"Surely we will, then," was the retort, "fer every boss counts one with us. Won't do any harm ter any of ye, though, if ye act purty an' don't go ter cuttin' up any tricks with us. We don't feel a bit like standin' any foolin', so th' sooner we come ter business th' better fer us all."

The men of the party dismounted and assisted the ladies to do the same, and some of the robbers strode forward at once and took charge of the horses and mules, thus robbing the travelers of nearly everything that they possessed.

But they were not satisfied with this.

"I shell have ter trouble ye fer any watches, jewelry, or boodle that ye happen ter have about ye, ladies an' gentlemen," the leader of the band then announced, "an' I hope ye won't be at all backwards about handin' them out, fer it will save lots o' trouble if ye are a little lively."

Again Mr. Woodland would have opposed, had it not been for the warning of Terrill, who urged upon him the folly of so doing if he valued his life.

It was a bitter pill to swallow, as those who have been there can testify, but it had to be taken, and there was no use of making faces over it.

One by one the members of the party were called forward and deprived of their valuables, with more or less murmuring, and when it came Barrington Duff's turn there was a howl. He had rather give up his life, he declared, than to give up his case of instruments and his boxes of salve.

The outlaw inquired what his calling was, and when he learned that he was a corn-doctor he gave his things back to him in disgust.

This encouraged Socrates Sniffin to demand his case of samples, but as he happened to represent a wholesale liquor house, and his samples were samples of the best articles in his line that his house could provide, he was laughed to scorn.

In a very short time it was all done, and all that was left to the travelers were their arms, their clothes—such as they happened to have on and about them, and a scanty store of provisions.

They were left in a sad plight.

The robbers made them lay down their arms and retire to quite a distance, while they got ready to take their leave, and in a little while they started off, leading the stolen horses and mules, and the party were left to help themselves as best they could.

It was enough to have discouraged hardier travelers than they, but they bore up bravely and turned their attention to finding a place to camp for the night.

Next day they started on, still going toward the south, and laid as many miles behind them as they possibly could, hoping to fall in with friends before their stock of provisions gave out.

All that day they traveled, making themselves as comfortable as circumstances would allow at night, and on the next day set out again.

About mid-afternoon, all sad, tired, disgusted and disheartened, as we have described them, the party came cut into a little valley that nestled between the towering mountains, and there they found a rude cabin that showed every sign of present habitation, although no one was to be seen, and there they stopped and took possession.

CHAPTER V.

STRANGERS IN POSSESSION.

WHEN Old Riddles, Philip Kingsley, Eugene Priestly, and Major Arlington Kendrick, with their prisoner, started for their camp, they found no further trouble in making their captive walk. One taste of the old ranger's knife had evidently been enough for him, and he did not hanker for another.

"I thought that I could find yer legs fer ye. I did, by hokey!" the old ranger commented, as they walked along, "an' I reckon I kin find yer tongue, too, when we git ter camp. I am a terror at sich work when I git started, an' you had better take warnin' an' unwind yer leetle story on th' way. It'll be healthier fer ye."

Never a word said the prisoner, however.

"Won't talk, eh?" muttered the old man. "Well, we'll see 'bout that later on. When you git th' rope round yer neck an' feel yer toes leavin' th' ground, mebbe ye'll change yer mind. An' that minds me of a purty good riddle. Why should th' gallows be a welcome refuge to a condemned man?"

The prisoner gave attention, thus showing that he could hear well enough, but made no attempt to respond. The others, however, laughed at gave it up, and the dog barked and began to show signs of excitement.

"That tickles you, Napoleon, don't it, old fellow?" the old guide chuckled. "I haven't th' least doubt but you could give us th' answer as straight as a string if you could only talk. Bein' as ye can't, howsumever, I must take it fer granted that you give it up too, so I'll have ter tell ye. Th' gallows should be a welcome refuge to a condemned man, because it is th' very last thing that he has got to depend on. How d'ye like that one, Napoleon?"

The dog kept up its short, sharp yelps, and its excitement increased.

"There is something more than riddles the matter with your dog, old man," observed Kingsley.

"Oh, no," insisted Riddles, "that is what is ticklin' him, fer he 'most allus goes on jest that way when I give him a riddle ter rattle with. He does seem ter act a little funny though, don't he?" he added, as he gave the dog closer attention. "What is th' trouble, Napoleon? what is it?"

The dog ran ahead a little way, as though following a trail.

"That settles it," declared the guide then, "he smells human critter o' some sort, sure. You fellers jest come along with this lad-a-buck an' I'll go on ahead a little ways an' see what is ter be seen."

"All right," responded Kingsley, "only take care that you don't fall into a trap of some sort."

"I'll sartainly try ter avoid any sich onpleasant mishap," and dropping his rifle to a trail, Riddles strode forward at an increased pace. The dog ran on ahead of him, and both man and dog were soon lost to sight of those who came on with the prisoner.

"Nap has got somethin' on his mind, that is a sure thing," the old ranger mused. "I wonder what it is? Mebbly there's more of th' pizen varmints around, an' mebbly th' fu'st thing I know I won't know nothin'. That would sartainly be onpleasant, I allow, but nevertheless I can't die but once, an' that bein' th' case, I'll keep on an' take th' chances. Why, th' dog is goin' straight fer th' cabin."

Just here was a bend in the valley and a sharp turn to the left. Beyond that turn, about a quarter of a mile away, was the old cabin in which Old Riddles and his party were camping.

When his dog disappeared around this bend, the old guide hurried forward a little faster. Before he reached the bend, however, he was surprised to see the dog come slinking back with its tail between his legs.

Riddles stopped short and looked at his dog in open-mouthed amazement.

"Howling wilderness!" he ejaculated, "what hes th' dog seen? Now there is somethin' mighty unusual goin' on 'round that 'ar bend, an' I know it. What kin it be? 'Bout th' only way ter find out is ter go an' see, I reckon."

Waiting until the dog came up to him, the old man inquired:

"What war it, Napoleon? what war it? Did ye see a ghost? Hang yer homely pictur' if ye don't act as if ye was skart ter death. I don't see why good an' sensible dogs like you wasn't made ter talk, so's ye could give an account of th' things ye see. Come on, an' we'll see if it will skar Old Riddles."

With these words the old ranger started forward, the dog following close at his heels, an act which made its master think more seriously than ever, wondering what it could possibly have seen.

When he arrived at the bend the old man cocked his rifle and proceeded with the greatest caution. Not knowing what to expect, he had to be prepared for everything that might present itself.

Keeping close to the rocky wall, he stepped silently and cautiously forward, and ere long he came far enough around to command a view of the place where the old cabin stood.

As stated, he was prepared for anything, and if he had seen the cabin only a heap of smoking ashes, with a hundred painted Indians dancing around it, it would not have surprised him in the least. The action of his dog had been so unusual that he knew not what to look for.

What he saw, though, when he had reached that point where the whole scene lay open before him, was so different from anything that he had imagined, even in the wildest flight of his imagination, that it fairly staggered him.

"Great rumblin' yarthquakes!" he exclaimed, "thar is no wonder that you got skart, Napoleon, not a bit. I'm skart myself; I am, by hokey."

There before the cabin was quite a number of persons, and, to the old mountain guide's startled imagination, it seemed that there were at least a dozen ladies in the party.

The reader, of course, will understand that these were Edgar Woodland and his party—the reservation castaways.

"Whar in th' world did they come from, Napoleon? That is a fair question, now, see if you kin answer it. An' who be they? Le's see, how many is there in th' bunch? Kin you count 'em? Thought at first that there must be at least a dozen or more of th' fair sex, but I guess I was too skart to count straight. There's four on 'em, I b'lieve, an' about as many men. Who in th' name o' th' 'ternal mountains kin they be?"

The old ranger stood and looked at them for some moments in silence, and then he turned and started back to meet the others of his own party.

"What have you seen?" demanded Kingsley, the moment he caught sight of his guide's face. "Have you seen a spook? You look as though you had been startled half out of your skin."

"Young man," returned Old Riddles, "that ain't no name for it. I have had sich a shock that I won't git over it in a month. As fer Napoleon, I'm 'fraid it will have a bad effect on his constitution, sure as he is a dog."

"Well, what was it?" inquired Priestly, impatiently.

"That is jest what I am tryin' ter tell myself ter my own satisfaction," the old ranger answered. "I am not sartain now that I haven't been in a sort o' trance fer th' space o' half a minute or so an' dreamed it all. Now I'd jest like ter have ye guess what it was that I see'd, an' see how fur off o' th' truth ye kin come."

"Is this another riddle?" asked the major.

"Call it that, if ye want to," was the reply, "an' ye will find it th' hardest riddle that ye ever tackled."

"I give it up," said Kingsley. "Your riddles are all pretty hard ones, old man, and if this is the hardest of the lot, there is no use in my trying to guess it."

"Same here," cried Priestly.

"And here," echoed the major.

"Now that won't do at all," objected the old mountain veteran. "I wanted ye ter give it jest a fair trial, an' see how fur off'n th' truth ye would hit. Now jest try it. S'pose you went

ahead thar to th' bend an' looked to'rds th' cabin, an' thar yer sight met th' most startlin' scene that ye kin well imagine, what d'ye think that scene o' sight would be? Mebbly I don't put that jest as plain as it might be put, but I guess you will know what I mean, even if ye don't know what I am talkin' about."

The old man's way of explaining what he meant was so quaint that it created a smile all around, and his listeners, all eager to learn what he really had seen, gave each a guess, in a haphazard way.

"Is the cabin burned?" asked Kingsley.

"Nary," was the reply.

"Have you found the rock of the cross?" ventured Priestly.

"Nary! though I allow that that would 'a' startled me purty much. Try it again. Your turn, major."

"Band of Indians in possession?" the major queried.

"Nary red! You're all wrong, an' ye wouldn't git it right if I should give ye a dozen trials, so I'll have ter tell ye. Thar is a party in possession o' our ranch, an' four o' th' party is wimmin."

"What!"

Such was the exclamation from all at once.

"That is jest th' gilt-edge truth o' th' matter, an' not a word out o' plumb, nuther," the old ranger averred. "Th' dog was ahead o' me, an' he got skart off at th' first sight of 'em, an' kem slinkin' back ter me like a whipped cur o' low degree. I knowed at once that somethin' awful war ter be seen around th' bend, but I wasn't prepared fer anything half so awful as a lot o' wimmin. I am th' most bashful critter in th' presence o' wimmin that you ever see. I went ahead, ready fer Injun, b'ar, or anything else, but when that sight bu'st upon my vision, I thought that I would faint away. An' now th' question arises—What is ter be done about it? I am ready ter cast my vote with Mr. Priestly an' th' major, I b'lieve, an' strike out o' here as soon as I kin git out. What say?"

Kingsley laughed.

"I am not so easily frightened as that," he declared. "The cabin is still ours, and we will go home and learn who the usurpers are. It must be a party of tourists who have wandered down this way, I should think."

"Mebby you are right, young man, but they are wimmin all th' same, an' if thar is anything in this world that I am afeerd of, it is wimmin. You kin count me as a outside boarder while they are 'round. I wouldn't go inter that cabin with them wimmin there fer a fortune."

"Why, are you really afraid of the fair sex?" Priestly asked.

"No, it ain't that," answered the old man, "but, as I said afore, I am too bashful ter grapple with 'em. If one of 'em should speak ter me I would be all onnerved fer a week, an' that is why I said I am afeerd of 'em."

"I know how to feel for you there," remarked Major Kendrick, "for I used to be bashful myself when I was a lad. You will no doubt outgrow it, however; I did."

"It is ruther late in life fer me ter think o' outgrowin' anything that has got sich a deep holt on me," reflected the old man, "but mebbly you are right. I'd a heap ruther take a lickin' than go back ter that cabin, though, an' that is gilt-edge truth. Won't you excuse me, an' let me camp out here alone till they go away?"

Kingsley assured him that he would hear to nothing of the kind, and so the old man made the best of a bad situation, and they started forward to the cabin.

CHAPTER VI.

OLD RIDDLES'S DILEMMA.

WHEN the party had passed around the bend, and came out where they could see their cabin, they found that the report the old ranger had given them was about correct.

Only two of the ladies were now visible, however, but there were four men in sight.

"That looks some better than it did th' other time," Old Riddles commented, "fer I do like ter see th' male critters in th' majority."

"They certainly will be soon, when we get there," Kingsley consoled.

They went on, and had passed half-way from the bend to the cabin before they were discovered by those who had taken possession of their camp.

As soon as they were seen there was a stir of excitement among those around the cabin, and one of the men started forward to meet them.

Seeing this, Philip Kingsley left the others of his party and went on ahead to greet the stranger.

The man who was coming out from the cabin was Edgar Woodland, and as he and Philip Kingsley approached each other they took each other's measure—as it is aptly put.

They were evidently satisfied with their mutual inspection, for when they met they both extended the right hand.

"We are strangers, sir," remarked Woodland, "but I think we meet as friends. I am sure we do, so far as I am concerned."

"I know of no reason why we should not be such," responded Kingsley, "and here is my hand. My name is Philip Kingsley."

"Mine is Edgar Woodland. Perhaps you are the owner of the cabin yonder that I and my party have taken possession of."

"Well, I can hardly claim to be its owner," answered Kingsley, "but I and my party have been making it our home for some time. You are welcome to share it with us, as I think I can safely promise."

"We have virtually taken possession already," was the laughing reply, "but of course we hold ourselves ready to vacate at once if you find our presence in any way objectionable. We have been meeting with a series of misfortunes lately, and are at the mercy of fate."

"I imagined something of the kind," Kingsley confessed, "when I saw you had ladies with you. You are a long way from the nearest town, and I do not see that you have any horses."

"We had horses, and pack-mules, too," Mr. Woodland informed, "but on the day before yesterday we were robbed, and since then we have been struggling along on foot. I was almost discouraged, though I did not let that be seen any more than I could not help, and I can tell you that it was a relief to my mind when I saw you."

"You have certainly had bad luck," Kingsley sympathized, "and anything that I can do to assist you I shall be happy to undertake. Here come my companions; let me introduce you to them—or rather them to you."

"I shall be pleased to have you do so."

Priestly, Major Kendrick and Riddles, with their prisoner, then came up, and the situation was made known to them.

"Robbed, war ye?" reiterated the old tramp of the mountains, in an interrogative tone. "I was not aware that there wur any of th' pizen varmint in this part of th' kentry. It ain't a very rich field fer them ter labor in, that is sartain."

"Nevertheless they made a raid upon us," assured Mr. Woodland, "and they left us almost beggared. And, by the way, the general appearance of this prisoner you have with you reminds me of them, although I did not see the faces of any of them."

"Shouldn't wonder a bit," declared Old Riddles, "fer any pizen critter that is pizen enough ter shoot at me from ahind cover, without any warnin', is pizen enough fer anything else. This feller won't talk, though—at least he thinks he won't—but I have an idee that he will change his mind afore he is many hours older, an' then mebbey we will learn somethin' about th' pizen gang that he belongs to."

The prisoner eyed Mr. Woodland sullenly, but would not answer when spoken to by him.

"Well," said Kingsley, "let's move on to the cabin, and we will try and make it more presentable in appearance for its unlooked-for guests. The presence of ladies among us is about the last thing that we would have dreamed of."

"They are glad enough to accept things as they are," returned Mr. Woodland, "and you need not go to any trouble on our account. Notwithstanding, if you will make them as comfortable as you can, and then later will help us to find our way out of this wild land, I assure you that you shall lose nothing by it."

"Do not speak of that," protested Kingsley, "for our duty is plain. Our old friend and guide here, Mr. Horn, is particularly fond of ladies, and I am sure he will exert himself to the utmost to make them comfortable and measurably happy."

"I shall sartainly try ter do my duty by 'em," promised the old ranger, though his friends had to smile as they noted how little heart there was in what he said.

They all went on to the cabin then, when introductions followed all around.

If any one had noticed the meetings with critical eye, he would have seen that Philip Kingsley allowed his gaze to rest longer upon Blanche Drayton, in an interested way, than upon any other of the ladies; and might, too, have noticed that Blanche allowed her eyes to follow him, even after he had turned away from her.

Such person, too, might have seen that there was a glance of recognition alive in the eyes of Deborah Flint, when she was presented to Major Arlington Kendrick. For one instant it was a wild look of surprise mingled with fear, and then it was turned, evidently by force of will, to one of strong determination. On the part of the major, however, there was nothing to indicate that he had ever seen Miss Flint before, and he greeted her with all the courtesy of a Chesterfield.

It did not need a person of critical eye, though, to note that both Major Kendrick and Eugene Priestly were badly smitten with the beauty, charms, and airy manners of Olivia Vane Devere. It was a clear case of love at first sight with both of them.

There were eyes to note this, too, and the eyes that did note it were the eyes of Socrates Sniffin, who, by the way, was head over ears in love with that young lady.

Old Riddles bore up well under the trying ordeal of being presented to the ladies, but got out of the way as quickly as possible after it was over.

Some time later Kingsley saw him leaning upon his rifle at some distance from the cabin, and when the old ranger saw that he was seen he motioned to the young man to come out to him.

Kingsley obeyed the summons and went.

"I want ter ask ye a question," the old man explained, speaking seriously.

"Well, let me hear what it is, my old friend," Kingsley requested.

"I want ter know who is goin' ter be cook, now that our family has increased. I wouldn't think o' sayin' this, if they were all men, ye onderstand, but fer me ter go in thar an' cook with them four wimmin lookin' on, I can't do it an' I won't."

Kingsley laughed.

"Well, if you are really so averse to the company of ladies," he said, "I will relieve you from that duty by undertaking it myself."

"Thar, I knowed you'd say that, an' I won't gree ter it at all. I like ter be my own cook, an' that was th' bargain I made wi' you when we set out, that I was ter be considered th' cook fer th' party. Of course I didn't count on any sich an increase in th' fambly as this, an' certainly not th' wimmin. An' now I want ter 'pose ter ye that we jest give up our camp ter them an' let 'em do their own cookin', an' we camp som'rs else an' do ourn. What say?"

"I can't agree to that at all," objected Kingsley. "Those girls are charming creatures, and I would not miss the pleasure of a day or two in their society for anything. I am willing to excuse you from the duty of cook, however."

"No, I won't hear ter that, nuther. If I must do it, why I'll put th' best face on th' matter that I kin, an' do th' best I kin. It must be understood, though, that I won't have them wimmin in the cabin while I am at work."

"You are altogether too sensitive, Uncle Sep," remonstrated Kingsley. "Why is it that you are so afraid of the ladies?"

"I ain't afeerd of 'em at all," declared the old ranger stoutly, "but I am bashful. I always was so an' I s'pose I allus will be so. It must run in th' fambly, fer Napoleon here is afflicted jest th' same way."

"You are one of the most emarkable men that I ever met," declared the young man. "Do you hold your dog as a relative?"

"Well, no, not 'zackly that, but we are like brothers, an' whatever 'fects me seems ter 'fect him jest th' same. He is a good dog, is Napoleon, an' I have no doubt he is as hungry as a b'ar now, fer that is th' way I feel."

"Well, then, let us wade in and provide something to eat," suggested Kingsley. "Come on, and together I guess we can overcome your weakness."

The old ranger shook his head as though somewhat doubtful about it, but agreed to follow the younger man back to the cabin.

Before they started, however, Mr. Woodland came up to where they stood.

"Oh! here you are, eh?" he exclaimed. "I have been looking for you. We are all discussing the question of something to eat. Who is the cook of your party, Mr. Kingsley?"

"Our old guide here has been filling that post, sir," was the reply. "We were just going in now to see what we can do to appease the craving of the appetite."

"Glad to hear it, for we are all pretty hungry. I was about to say that we are ready and more than willing to assist in any way that we possibly can. When we set out from Denver we had a camp cook, but he deserted us after two or three days, and then our guide helped us out. Some of the time, however, one of the ladies, Miss Flint, assisted him, and she is ready and willing to assist here, if she may be allowed to do it. What say you?"

"I say nary an assist," answered the old guide, before Kingsley had time to speak. "I am ter be th' cook, or I am not ter be, jest as ye like; but I won't have no woman ter assist me, an' that settles that. Not meanin' any offense," he added, "but me an' th' wimmin don't hitch wuth a rusty cent."

"But," urged Woodland, "Miss Flint is one of the nicest old ladies that you ever saw. She would not thank me for calling her old, I fancy, but she is certainly no chicken. No matter, she is a fine woman, and who could tell what would be the result if you and she were to take hold of the culinary department of our combined camp together? It may win you a noble wife, my good sir."

Here the old ranger's dog set up a howl.

"No need ter howl like that, Napoleon, no need ter howl like that," assured the old man, "fer no sich calamity will ever overtake us. There ain't enough wimmin in th' hull State ter marry us, knowin' th' Rockies like we do, so don't be alarmed. Sich a proposition as that, my friend," turning to Woodland, "most scares my dog inter fits. Please don't never mention it again."

Mr. Woodland was about to make some reply to that, when he was interrupted in a startling manner. The whistle of a bullet was heard, the old ranger sprung back in very much the same manner as he had done on another occasion, and then came the report of a rifle.

CHAPTER VII.

A MYSTIC LIGHT.

"BLAST their ornery pictur's!" Old Riddles cried, "this heur is gettin' ter be a nuisance. I don't object to their havin' a leetle fun, but this is carryin' fun too fur. I think we'd better put ourselves out o' sight."

"Was that shot fired at you, do you think?" asked Woodland.

"Was it? Well, I should ruther say it was. It kem almost as close as th' other one did."

"You seem to have some enemies in the hills, old man," remarked Kingsley.

"That is th' way it looks, fer a fact," the old ranger agreed. "But they won't have it all their own way, not if I know it. I'm goin' fer this feller th' same as I did fer th' other one."

While talking, the men had hastily retreated to the shelter of the near-by valley wall, from somewhere upon the side of which the shot had come, and there they stopped.

It was only a little distance from them to the cabin, and the cabin, by the way, was situated so that it could not be attacked from any side save the front.

"You may not fare as well this time as you did the other," cautioned Kingsley, in response to the old man.

"I shall sartainly fare wuss if I don't go fer him," rejoined the ranger, "fer he'll no doubt try another shot at me th' fu'st chance. You fellers go on to th' cabin, take keer o' yerselves, an' I'll try ter be thar before sundown. If I don't turn up at all you will know that somethin' has happened."

"We can't afford to have anything happen to you, my old friend," enjoined Kingsley, "and I think you had better not leave us. Or, let me go with you."

"An' I can't afford ter let th' pizen imps keep poppin away at me jest as they please, nuther," avowed the ranger. "They must l'arn that I am not th' sort of man to put up with their nonsense. As fer yer goin' with me, yer place is here. Besides, I have an idee that I kin do better alone in a case of this sort."

"All right, but take care of yourself."

"I'll try ter do that, an' you take keer of that other pizen critter an' see that he don't git away."

"Don't trouble yourself about him," Kingsley reassured, "for he is tied up too well to get away without help."

"Watch out then that he don't git help," Old Riddles cautioned, and with that he turned and strode away, keeping close to the rocky wall so as not to be seen from above.

"Your old friend is a queer one," observed Woodland, as he and Kingsley started for the cabin.

"He is indeed," Kingsley agreed. "He is as brave as a lion, though, and as good a friend as man ever found in man."

"I can see that. It seems that he is rather afraid of the fair sex, however. That is rather an amusing trait in his character."

"Yes, it is indeed; and I never believed it until to-day."

So they talked on until they reached the cabin, and there they joined the others in their pursuit of something to eat, Kingsley having first taken a look at the prisoner to assure himself that he was secure.

The prisoner was confined in a little out-house that had at one time been used as a stable by some former occupant of the cabin.

With so many willing hands to do the work, something to eat was soon prepared, and then all gathered around the rude table to do justice to the spread.

The ladies had regained their spirits to a certain extent, and all chatted away as merrily as though no misfortune had overtaken them.

"We are doing pretty well," remarked Mr. Woodland, "considering that we have had the misfortune to be robbed of nearly everything that we possessed."

"There is certainly no great reason to complain," agreed Barrington Duff. "I suppose it might be a great deal worse with us. Were it not for the discomfort of the ladies, I should say that we ought to be happy."

"The ladies are not so miserable as you would have them appear to be," ventured Miss Drayton.

"Indeed no!" gushed Miss Devere. "It will take more than one band of robbers to crush our spirits entirely. As Luther has said—Luther, the morning sun of German literature, you know:

"And were this world all devils o'er,
And watching to devour us,
We lay it not to heart so sore,
We know they can't o'erpower us."

"I think you quote correctly," flattered Socrates Sniffin.

"Yes, I have given the lines word for word," Miss Devere assured. "Perhaps you can think of something still more suitable, Mr. Sniffin."

"Well, er—I am afraid not. You see my active life has knocked a great deal of the higher knowledge out of me."

This was Sniffin's stereotyped excuse when ever pressed to the wall by the fair Olivia.

"Did you ever have any of the higher knowledge?" insinuated Eugene Priestly. "Perhaps you can tell us who Luther was and when he lived."

Mr. Sniffin got very red, something remarkable for a man of his calling.

"Do not think to thrust me forward as a shield for your own ignorance," he snapped.

"Would not think of such a thing," declared Priestly, smiling. "I do not pretend to know anything about classic learning, and hence my inquiry."

"If you would really like to know," volunteered the gushing *bas-bleu*, "I will tell you, Mr. Priestly, for dates are bound to get away from us unless we are in love with our subject; Luther flourished between 1483 and 1546."

"Thanks," said Priestly; "but if you ask me for those dates to-morrow, I shall not be able to give them to you."

"Which proves the uselessness of casting pearls before swine," asserted the drummer, happy to get in such a shot.

This created a laugh, but Priestly was not quite floored.

"That is quite true and quite well put," he returned. "I said that I shall have forgotten those dates by to-morrow, but I dare lay a wager that you have forgotten them already."

The expression of the drummer's face for a single instant went to prove that such was actually the case, though he tried to brave it out, and, with the hardness of his "cheek" to back him, succeeded very well.

"I think that I can give Mr. Sniffin a line or two from Goethe that will help him out," observed Kingsley, who had mean time been paying attentions to Blanche Drayton.

"Oh, can you?" cried Miss DeVere, beaming upon him instantly; "no doubt he will be glad to have you assist his memory a little."

"You may not strike the right chord in his soul," remarked Blanche.

Mr. Sniffin rattled away in a loquacious manner, ending by inviting Kingsley to go ahead and give him the lines he had in mind.

"Very well," consented Kingsley, "here they are:

"The light of the cheek, the lip's red bloom,
I shall never forget to the day of doom."

And Kingsley turned to Miss Drayton: "Do you think I have missed the chord?" he asked.

The lady did not look up, and her cheeks reddened a little as she replied:

"It is hard to guess the sentiments of others; ask Mr. Sniffin."

Kingsley had been speaking a word for Sniffin and two for himself, as the old saw has it.

"That will do very well, very well indeed," exclaimed Sniffin; "consider it as said by me, Miss DeVere."

"It would hardly be fair to Mr. Kingsley for me to do that," returned Miss DeVere. "I will give you credit for the sentiment, however, if you desire. Do you admire Goethe, Mr. Kingsley?"

"Yes, the little I have read of him," Kingsley responded. "Do you?"

"Oh! yes, indeed! I think he is simply grand! He is the monarch of them all, the meridian sun of German literature."

"You see Miss DeVere's favorite study was literature," remarked Mrs. Woodland to Kingsley.

"German literature, amended the young lady.

"You mean that is your pet hobby," supplemented Mr. Woodland.

"How can you call it so?" demanded the fair Miss DeVere, with an injured air. "Can a person not have a favorite subject of mental food without its being classed as a hobby?"

"It does not become a hobby until it is made to overrule every other thought in the mind," Mr. Woodland returned. "But, no matter," he added, "you might have a worse hobby than German literature."

So the conversation ran on all around the festive board.

Barrington Duff paid particular attention to Miss Flint—attentions which that lady received with as cool a grace as she could command.

There was a great deal of merriment going on, too, called forth by the scanty array of dishes and viands. There were only three or four tin plates, and as many knives and tin cups. The eatables consisted of roast bear-meat and hard bread, with plain coffee.

It was rather hard fare, but it was eagerly devoured, for all were as hungry as they well could be.

Several times the eyes of Major Arlington Kendrick fixed themselves upon Miss Deborah Flint, and there was a troubled look on the man's face, as though he was vainly trying to recall where he had ever seen her before.

Miss Flint noticed this, but her face was as stern and hard as the substance from which she took her name. At first sight of him there had been a show of recognition in her face; but now, by the force of her will, that was all gone, and there was nothing for the major to ground his belief upon if he fancied he had ever known her.

He, like Barrington Duff, treated her with all the politeness he could command.

To dwell upon all that was said and done at the table would require more space than can be spared to the subject, as there are more vital interests at stake. Let it suffice to say that everything passed off as pleasantly as possible, and the very best of good-fellowship seemed to exist all around, except, perhaps, between Priestly and Socrates Sniffin.

When they were done, Kingsley went out to the other building and fed the prisoner, after which he took his station in front of the cabin to watch for the return of the old ranger.

Some of the others joined him, and they became interested in their conversation so that the time passed rapidly and it was night before they could realize it.

It is a quick transition from daylight to dark in the mountains.

In a short time more it was quite dark, and the watchers were about to enter the cabin, when their attention was drawn to a peculiar light that was waving to and fro on the side of the mountain that overshadowed the cabin in the rear.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CLEVER ESCAPE.

"COME ON, Napoleon, ye honest old rogue ye!" Old Riddles called to his dog, as he left Kingsley and Woodland and started off to hunt for the man who had fired the treacherous shot at him. "We'll see if we can't bring th' feller ter terms an' stop this kind o' fun. Don't you make any noise, but keep yerself right ter my heels. We'll have ter use all th' caution we know how, I reckon. You be a good dog an' 'tend well ter business, an' when I have time I'll tell ye riddles till ye can't rest."

The old ranger stole cautiously forward, and the dog kept right at his heels, as though he understood every word that had been said to him.

Keeping close to the side of the rocky wall, he went on around until he came to a place where he could climb up, when he started up the rugged height as silently as possible.

Still the dog came on at his heels.

It was one of the most wild and rugged places in all that wild and rugged country. Huge rocks lay around in fantastic profusion, many of them seeming ready to roll their massive forms down into the valley at the slightest touch. Trees of stunted growth and fantastic distortion in every degree grew up among the rocks, seeming to hold many of them in their places, as no doubt some of them did.

"Come on, Napoleon," the old man whispered, as he paused for a moment to rest; "but don't ye say never a word. There may be sharp ears around, an' we don't want any more fancy shootin' at our expense. It is mighty onhealthy ter git hit with a bullet, as you are no doubt aware. Come on!"

Having tarried a moment he started on, using all the caution and silence that was possible, and with a man of such ripe experience it was possible in a high degree.

On up, around, over, and under the rocks he made his way, the dog right at his heels, and before a great while they were in the neighborhood of the place from where the shot had come, as near as Old Riddles could tell.

Suddenly the old ranger stopped short, motioning the dog to do the same.

He had caught sight of the head of a man.

With more caution than ever he now moved on, as soon as he had made sure that he had not been seen, and presently came out directly behind the place where the man was standing.

Crouching, the old man motioned the dog to do likewise, and he began then to arrange some plan of action, which he was not long in doing.

The man before him was another of about the same stamp as the one he had captured, and the old mountaineer decided at a glance that the two were a pair of the same brood, as he mentally put it.

The fellow was standing before a huge rock, looking over the ledge in front of him and down into the valley. Only his head was in sight from where Old Riddles stood.

"That is jest about whar ye stood when ye popped away at me, I ruther think, my purty feller," thought the old man. "No doubt you are watchin' ter git another crack at yer uncle. S'pose ye can't quite see th' cabin from thar, an' ye think I'll meander out inter sight soon. Wal, you keep right on a-lookin' fer about a minute, an' I will ruther s'prise ye, I'm a-thinkin'."

Rising up, the old ranger stepped silently forward to the rock against which the fellow was leaning, leaned upon it with his breast and arms, brought forward his long rifle, and carefully advanced it over the rock until its cold muzzle touched the man on one of his ears.

With a great start the man roused up and turned around.

He was then startled worse than ever.

"Don't git skar't, stranger, don't git skar't!" said the old ranger, coolly. "I wouldn't harm ye fer th' world, unless my finger happens ter have a twitch, as it sometimes does when a pizen critter like you stands afore me. You jest drop yer weepins, though, an' put yer hands

up whar I kin see them, an' I guess ye won't git hurt."

The man promptly obeyed.

"That is right," assured the old man, "an' now I want ter have a leetle talk with ye. What fer kid ye drop that chunk o' lead down thar at me a leetle while ago? I don't object ter your havin' all th' fun ye kin git out o' life, but I do object ter yer droppin' lead pills inter my camp. Speak up, now, an' give an account of yer conduct."

The man grunted, something after the manner of a pig, but said never a word.

"What is ther matter with yer?" Old Riddles demanded. "Can't ye talk?"

Another grunt or two.

"Can't talk, eh? Wal, that is pecoolyer, by hokey. Mebby I kin help ye. If you don't open yer head an' talk at a two-forty gait afore I count ten, by hokey I'll drill a tunnel through yer. Jest see if ye can't git out a word or two afore th' time is up. Try hard."

There was a cold glitter in the old man's eyes that showed that he was in deadly earnest, and the man before him paled.

"One, two, three," the old ranger commenced, and then the man began to grunt at a terrific rate, pointing to his mouth.

Riddles stopped counting, and observed:

"Oh, I see; there is somethin' th' matter with yer talker, is there? Wal, I allow that that is ruther bad. Jest stick out yer tongue, as th' doctors say, an' I'll see if I kin locate yer trouble."

The man put out his tongue just a little way.

"Can't git it no further, eh?" quoth Riddles.

The man shook his head.

"Wal, open yer mouth then, an' let me git a view of yer inside. Mebbe I kin tell whar th' stopper is."

This the man did, too, and as far as the old ranger could see there was no difference between this man's mouth and his own.

"My honest opine of ye," the old ranger averred, "is that ye are lyin' like forty. Bein' as I ain't no doctor, howsumever, I'll have ter take yer word fer it fer th' present. I must say though, that this affliction o' dumbness seems ter be epperdemick to-day. That makes me all the more s'picious of your case."

The man remained silent, but it was clear that there was nothing out of order with his hearing machinery.

"An' now," Riddles continued, "you will greatly oblige me if you will come out here an' let me get a better view of yer homely kerkiss. Take good care that ye don't try on any fool-trick, though, fer if ye do this here rifle is likely ter go off an' blow ye ter kingdom come afore ye kin say beans."

The fellow nodded to show that he understood, and then made signs with his hands to show that he would have to come around. This, as the old ranger took it, was taking precaution against the rifle's going off.

"That is all right," said Zeb, "come right on around, an' I'll be here ter welcome ye when ye appear. Please don't risk yer life by any attempt at tricks, though, as I said afore."

The man nodded again, and immediately stooped and disappeared from sight.

Riddles drew back from the rock a little way, so that he would have a clear field in which to watch in both directions, to guard against treachery, and waited for the man to come out into sight.

But he waited in vain.

Half a minute passed, and then the old ranger called out:

"Come, it seems ter me that it takes you a pesky long while ter git out here where I kin see you; what are ye doin'?"

No reply, of course.

"If ye don't show yerself instanter," old Zeb thundered, "I'll be 'round thar after ye, an' then I'll drill a tunnel inter ye at sight. You'd better git a move onter ye, I'm tellin' ye."

Still there was no response.

The old ranger was greatly puzzled. What could be the meaning of the silence and stubborn defiance of the rascal?

"By hokey, but I'll see what is th' trouble!" he exclaimed. "Here, Nap, jest dodge 'round thar an' see what that feller is up to!"

The dog obeyed instantly, and as soon as it had disappeared around the rock it set up a low growl.

"Blast it, what kin be th' meanin' of sich work, anyhow?" the old man complained. "I'll mighty soon know, an' it won't be healthy fer a sartain pizen critter that I know of, nuther," and the old man followed the dog, keeping the sharpest kind of lookout in every direction.

It took him only a moment to get around the rock, to the place where his enemy had stood, and then much to his surprise he found that the man was nowhere to be seen!

Here was a riddle with a vengeance. What had become of him in so short a time? How could he get away so soon without being seen? His rifle, too, was gone, and nothing remained to show which way he had taken leave.

It was rather a trying moment for the old ranger, for he was now in danger of instant death, if the fellow was where he could draw aim upon him.

A hasty look around, however, convinced him that the man was nowhere within range, for there was no place where he could be concealed. In front was a little plateau, or table, of rock. In one direction this was cut off by a steep ascent, and in the other the man could not have got away without meeting the old ranger as he was coming around.

The dog soon solved the mystery.

With its nose at the ground it ran around and around for some moments, and then it darted suddenly to the edge of the plateau. There it stopped and whined.

The old man was just turning his attention to the same place.

"Found his trail, have ye, old dog?" he observed. "We'll see what kin be did ter git another turn at him, then."

Stepping to the edge, he found the mystery solved. There a plain and smooth surface of rock stretched away at an angle of about forty-five degrees. It was about ten yards in width from top to bottom. At the bottom was a thick growth of bushes and several trees. On this rock were marks showing plainly that some person had recently slipped down it. This was the way in which the man had made his escape!

"Blast it!" the old ranger exclaimed, "that is what I call 'zasperatin'. Ter think that we had him so nice, Napoleon, an' now ter think that he's laughin' at us. It is too much, an' I move that we go fer him red hot. Come on."

Without more ado the old guide sat down on the edge of the slope, moved forward a little, and then down he went.

In a moment he was at the bottom, tangled in the bushes and holding fast to a tree. But it took him only a minute to free himself and get upon his feet again. Then he looked up and called to his dog to follow.

Napoleon hesitated for a little, but when his master called again the noble animal ventured to make the start, and soon was at the old ranger's side.

"That is ther stuff," Old Zeb complimented, patting the dog's head, "an' now let us git right down ter business an' see what kin be done."

CHAPTER IX.

A SPY IN CAMP.

By getting down to business, Old Zeb meant, to pick up the trail as soon as possible and set out in pursuit of the man who had so cleverly escaped from him.

The dog was not long in finding the trail, and set out upon it immediately.

But the old ranger called his faithful companion back.

"Now, Napoleon," he admonished, "pay 'tention ter what I have got ter say ter ye. I don't want ye to go so lightning fast that my old legs can't keep up with ye. I don't want ye ter make any fuss. D'ye understand? Jest bear them p'int's in mind, an' see how good a dog ye kin be."

The dog whined as though it understood perfectly well every word that was said to it, which we very much doubt; but the animal was so well-trained, and was so used to its master's way and manner, that it understood what was required in the case almost as well as Old Riddles himself.

"Well, go on now," directed the old man and the dog started again.

The Rocky Ranger was by no means unaware of the danger he was running into, for he knew that the man he was after might stop at almost any point, waiting for him to come on, and then try another shot at him.

But there was another side to the same argument. He did not think that the man was aware positively that he had a dog with him, and without a dog it would be impossible for him to follow the trail with anything like speed. This might lead the fugitive to be a little careless.

Riddles went forward with all caution, his trusty rifle ready for business at an instant's warning.

The dog led him a winding way along the side of the hill, and a way that was by no means a delightful one. Here the rocks and bushes were even worse to overcome than they had been higher up.

On and on around, away from the neighborhood of the cabin and away from the valley, and on then toward the south.

After some time the trail led them out into a more open path, and there they were enabled to make better speed.

"I am powerful hungry, Napoleon," the old man mused, addressing his dog in his thoughts, "but I am on th' war-path now, an' I mean ter see this thing to th' end. I don't want ter go back ter th' camp with no prisoner, an' there have ter tell how I got left by th' p'izen critter. Oh, no, that won't do at all. We must git him, Napoleon, if it costs us a leg apiece."

They pressed on, man and dog together, the dog keeping its nose steadily upon the scent while the man watched unceasingly for danger ahead.

So they continued, going on and on until two miles or more had been laid behind them.

Then the old ranger suddenly awoke to the

fact that it was rapidly growing dark, and that night would soon be upon them.

"Hello, Napoleon, hang me if it ain't gettin' dark!" he exclaimed. "What is ter be done about that? Shall we press on, or shall we turn about an' strike fer home? Seems ter me that we can't do a wonderful sight o' work in the dark, unless the p'izen critter has gone inter camp an' we could sneak up onter him an' make sure o' him. What shall we do?"

They both stopped, and the dog appeared to be taking the question into consideration as earnestly as its master.

"We have kem quite a distance, my good dog," the old guide reasoned, "an' if we turn back now all our work thus far will ha' been in vain. I reckon we had better go on an' see if we can't make somethin' out of it. Come, we'll see what we kin do, fer this is better than playin' camp cook with a lot o' wimmin around ter look on."

They went on, and night began to settle down in a more determined aspect until the shadows were quite thick around them.

They had gone but a short distance, after their last stop, when the old ranger suddenly called another halt.

Down below them lay a little valley, and in that valley were a number of lights moving to and fro, and in the midst of them was a camp-fire.

"Thar, we have struck pay-dirt at last, old dog," observed the old ranger, "an' now it remains ter be seen how much it will pay fer th' workin'. I'd like ter know what sort o' p'izen hornets' nest we have kem to, anyhow. We'll meander down that way an' have a look at th' camp. Come on."

Picking his way carefully, the mountain ranger descended toward the camp, and in due time had gained a point about as close as he cared to approach.

Whispering to the dog to be silent, Old Riddles crouched down, having chosen a favorable spot, and there awaited developments.

He had not long to wait to learn something that was of interest to him and the party he represented. A band of horsemen were about setting out from the camp, and the Rocky Ranger had not been long in his hiding-place when a little company of men approached the spot where he was in hiding, stopping only a few yards from where he and the dog were lying.

"It was lucky that you fooled the old tramp and got away, Ben," observed one, "for this puts us on the right tack to go back and rescue Burke."

"Yes, I did fool him," was the return, "and in the worst kind of way, too. I dare bet that he is swearing about it yet. I had to laugh to myself when I heard him shoutin' out after me when I had got to th' bottom of th' slantin' rock. I'll bet he didn't find my trail in a hurry."

"Did he have the dog?"

"I didn't see it if he had."

"So much the better for that. Now we will get over there as soon as we can, and get ready to rescue Grinder."

"You bet."

"That is th' galoot that couldn't talk," thought the old guide. "This is proof enough that th' other one kin talk too, if he wants ter, an' I ruther think he will want to when I git at him. It won't do him any good ter play off now."

"How did ye come ter miss th' old ranger?" asked another of the company.

"I give it up," was the answer. "I thought that I had a dead bead on him, but it seems that I hadn't. I guess his time hadn't come."

"That is jest about th' way that I look at it myself," the old mountaineer thought, "an' I ruther think that I'll make ye all sick afore I do die, too."

"Wal, what is th' captain's orders?" asked yet another.

"Why, we must go over thar to whar th' folks is campin', an' git Grinder out o' their hands. Then if we kin do that without bein' seen an' run inter danger, we are ter look out fer a crack at th' old guide. Once he is out of the way there will be no trouble in th' rest of th' game."

"I am very much 'bliged to ye fer th' information," thought Old Riddles, "an' I'll try an' make th' most of it. You come right on ter th' cabin, an' if I kin only git thar ahead of ye, you bet that there will be a warm reception fer ye."

The men went on, and that was about all that the old ranger could get of what they said.

"I'd like ter know what they are after me fer," he reflected. "I don't know any of 'em, fur as I kin see. Thar must be somethin' back of all this, an' Old Riddles is jest th' boy that wants ter know all about it."

Others of the company were getting out horses while those whom we have quoted were talking, and now the horses were brought up to them all ready for the trail.

The men were into the saddles in a moment, and in the dim light the mountain veteran saw them place masks over their faces. That done, a few more words were exchanged among them and they were ready to set out.

"By hokey alive!" the old man exclaimed, under his breath, "if these ain't th' p'izen crit-

ters that robbed Mr. Woodland and his party, then I am a sinner. I reckon I am a sinner anyhow, but if sich ain't th' case, I'm a wuss one than I ever intended ter be. An' what is ter be done about it? Old Riddles used ter be a terror to all sich when he was younger, an' he ruther thinks that he will have ter try his hand at th' same work again."

The horsemen were about ready to go, but they were detained by a man who came running out to them from the center of their camp.

"Th' captain wants a word with ye afore ye go," he said. "He will be here in a minute."

"All right, we kin wait," was the response.

Another man soon came to where they stood, a torch in his hand.

He was tall and well formed, and wore a mask that covered his entire face. There was something about him that showed him to be the superior of those around him.

By the light of the torch the old ranger was enabled to see the party quite plainly, and among the faces of those who were not masked he saw one he recognized. This man was one whom he had once seen in the hands of a sheriff, accused of horse-stealing.

"One sample is enough ter test th' whole p'le by," he thought. "They are a bad lot, an' I shouldn't be s'prised if there was a heap o' trouble in th' near future. I am of th' opine that there is goin' ter be a red-hot time in these hills afore I git my party out of it. Hang it, anyhow, why did them wimmin want ter poke their noses inter sich a kentry? I hate tarnally ter have a lot o' wimmin on my hands, an' most specially when there is blood on th' moon."

"We're waitin' for ye, captain," said the leader of the horsemen, when the man with the light came up. "What is ther word?"

"I have another word or two to say to you before you start," was the reply. "I want to warn you again to look out for that old ranger, for it will be sure death to you if you let him get the drop on you. If such a thing is possible, get a shot at him and put him out of the way. Then I want you to learn just how strong the party is, and every point you can. I have made up my mind to have one of those girls."

"We'll do it, captain, if it takes all night. D'ye want us ter gobble up one of th' gals, if we have a chance ter do it?"

"No, I will attend to that myself. All I want you to do is what I have told you. You attend to that and I will see to the rest of it."

"All right. Is that all?"

"Yes, that is all, and now be off with you, and get in early."

With this the captain of the band of outlaws waved his torch and strode back in the direction whence he had come.

In a moment more the horsemen started off, the others walked away toward the camp-fire, and then Old Riddles and his dog got up from their place of hiding.

"Snakes an' tarnation," the old man muttered, "but there is trouble on th' wing fer sure, Napoleon, an' we must git back ter camp jest as soon as we kin. There is one thing in our favor, an' that is that we have th' shortest way ter go, an' we must make th' most of it. Come on."

With an ease and certainty that had come of his long years of experience, the old ranger took the back trail, not minding the fact that it was now dark, and with the dog at his heels, hurried along with all possible speed toward the cabin where he had left his party.

"There is goin' ter be music in th' air, Napoleon, sure as ye're born," he muttered as he hurried along. "No time fer riddles now, old dog, though I know ye're dyin' ter hear some good ones. Never mind, though, fer we won't be long in gittin' to camp, an' then if they ain't c't everything up clean, you shall have a rousin' big supper. If ye're as hungry as I am, ye're about famished."

CHAPTER X.

THE BALL OF FIRE.

"WHAT can that mean?" questioned Mr. Woodland, who was the first to notice the peculiar light of which mention was made at the close of a preceding chapter.

"You will have to ask me something easier than that," responded Kingsley. "I can only tell you that it is a light."

As they watched it the light waved to and fro several times, then stopped for a few seconds, and then waved to and fro again, and so it went on for several minutes.

"It is a torch waved by some person," declared Priestly.

"Then that person must be trying to signal to some one," ventured Walden Terrill.

"Can it be that he is signaling to us?" interrogated Woodland.

"I should say not, unless it happens to be Old Riddles," returned Kingsley.

"Perhaps it is he," suggested Priestly.

"It will do no harm to answer it, anyhow," proposed Woodland. "Suppose we do so."

"Just as you all agree," consented Kingsley.

"Yes, let's do it," was the cry from all.

"Some one procure a torch, and we will see what we can do," ordered Philip.

Terrill hurried in the cabin and brought out a pine stick, all ablaze.

"Shall I try him now?" he asked.

"Yes, as soon as he waves again," Kingsley directed.

In a few moments the light was seen moving as before, and then Terrill answered in the same manner.

No sooner was this done, than the person up on the mountain-side acknowledged the return signal by waving the light around and around several times in succession.

"I believe it is to us that he is signaling!" declared Kingsley. "Give him the same signal in return, Mr. Terrill."

This was done, and immediately the light on the mountain-side became stationary.

"Now what is coming?" questioned Woodland.

"No doubt we shall soon see," Kingsley decided.

Kingsley was right. In a short time another light appeared near the first, a larger and brighter one, and that was waved in the same manner as the other.

Again the answer was given.

A moment passed, during which both the lights were stationary. Then came something that was entirely unlooked-for. The greater of the two lights was waved around and around for a moment with great rapidity, and then it shot out and down like a bolt from the sky.

Those who were looking stood spellbound.

Down and down the ball of fire came, drawing a train of flame and light after it that gave it the appearance of a comet.

It was only a few seconds in making the descent, actual time, but to those who were watching the time seemed a great deal longer.

Down it came, and struck the ground only a few yards forward from where the watchers were standing.

All ran forward immediately to learn what it was.

Kingsley was the first to reach it, though the others pressed around him in a moment, all full of curiosity to see what it was.

Their attention was drawn to the ball of fire, naturally, and they found that to be simply a ball of rags, securely wound and tied with string of raw-hide. It had been soaked with pitch and fat, and burned furiously.

To that was attached a string about two feet in length, to the end of which was tied a stone of about a third of a pound in weight.

To that string, near the stone, was secured a narrow and flat piece of raw-hide, the raw side out, which was sewed at the side and end.

"What in the name of mystery have you got?" asked Mr. Woodland.

"That is just what I want to know," Kingsley returned.

"There is only one way to find out," reminded Priestly, "and that is to look and see."

"Right you are," admitted Kingsley, and taking his knife he cut the thong that held the stone to the ball of fire, and detached the piece of hide.

By the light of the torch and the ball of fire together, they could see plainly enough.

As soon as he had freed the folded and sewed piece of raw-hide from the stone and string, Kingsley hastened to examine it, and as he turned it over he saw that there was writing on one side of it.

"Ha! here is something!" he exclaimed, and he read:

"If this comes all right, answer by three turns of torch."

"Shall I give the required answer?" asked Terrill, who still held the torch in hand.

"Yes, give three turns of your torch," answered Kingsley.

This Terrill did, and a recognition was given in like manner from the person up on the side of the mountain, after which the light immediately disappeared.

"Well, this lays away over the greatest mystery of the kind that I ever had anything to do with," avowed Mr. Woodland.

"I believe that I can truthfully say the same," coincided Kingsley. "There is something about this that makes it more than a mystery. I am puzzled to guess who the sender of it can have been."

"Do you think it was not Old Riddles?" asked Priestly.

"I thought at first that it might be, but now I have changed my mind," was the reply. "The writing on this is better than he could do, rough as it is. Besides, what possible object could he have in going to such trouble?"

"Well, open the thing and see what is in it," suggested Terrill.

"That is about the wisest thing to do, I guess," agreed Kingsley, "and here goes."

With his knife he ripped open the seam where it was sewed, and drew forth a sheet of paper.

"It is a letter, I should say," he remarked.

"It certainly is," agreed Woodland; "read it."

Kingsley unfolded the paper, spread it out, and read:

"STRANGERS:—You had better get out of the hills as soon as you can. The Night Hawks are after

you, and Captain Red-hand shows no mercy. The ladies of your party were better dead than to fall into his hands. Be warned in time and flee. Having warned you, I can do no more. Do not hesitate, for there is truth in what I tell you. You have met the Night Hawks once; beware of a second meeting.

"FRIEND.

"More mystery than ever," commented Woodland. "What do you think about it, Mr. Kingsley?"

"I hardly know what to think about it," was Kingsley's reply. "It is certainly very warning in its tone, and I wish Old Riddles were here to give us his views on the matter."

"Amen to that. Since he is not, however, what are we to do about the matter? Shall we take the warning and move away from here?"

"Nary a move, so far as I am concerned," returned Kingsley. "This is a free country, or poses as such, and I do not give up my rights to any person."

"And these Night Hawks—they must be the ones who robbed me and my party, since our mysterious friend says we have met them once."

"No doubt about that I guess, and I am of the opinion that the man we have taken prisoner is one of them. I wish our old guide would come."

"Have you ever heard of the person spoken of here—this Captain Red-hand?"

"No, I never have; but that is not remarkable, for I have not been West long enough to become posted in regard to the celebrities of the day."

The ladies of the party, seeing from the cabin that something unusual was going on, came out to learn what it was.

"What in the world are you doing?" demanded Mrs. Woodland.

"Playing with fire," answered her husband, with a laugh. "We must do something to amuse ourselves, you know."

"It seems to me that you are easily amused, then," was the rejoinder.

It was instantly plain to Kingsley that Mr. Woodland did not desire the ladies to learn of the warning that had been received, and he was about to add something to help turn aside the truth of the matter when Socrates Sniffin blurted out:

"We have been enjoying a delightful mystery, ladies; we have just received a message from the clouds."

"A message from the clouds," repeated Blanche Drayton; "what do you mean?"

"Oh! what delightful secret is this?" queried Miss DeVere. "Do tell us, gentlemen, and at once."

"It was my purpose to keep it from you for the present," said Woodland, "but now that the cat has its head out of the bag and you all know that it is a cat, we may as well tell you all about it."

This was done, and, as may be imagined, the ladies were thrown into a state of intense excitement.

"What shall we do?" asked Mrs. Woodland, nervously.

"About the best thing to be done is to prepare for an attack, if they intend to make one," advised Kingsley.

"You are right," agreed Woodland, "and I think we had better repair to the cabin and see about making the ladies comfortable for the night."

"Yes," acquiesced Kingsley, "that is about the most important work we have on hand now, and it must be attended to."

"You seem to look upon us as very helpless creatures," observed Blanche Drayton. "I think that we can prove we are not children, if danger comes."

"Nevertheless, you will surely not refuse us the pleasure of standing as your protectors and defenders, will you?" asked Kingsley.

"No, certainly not; but you must think of your own comfort as well as ours."

Thus talking, they all went to the cabin, and the men of the party began at once to erect a partition to divide the room in two, one side of which was to be dedicated to the exclusive use of the ladies. They were fortunate in finding sufficient material for their purpose, and in a reasonable time their work was done. The partition was not remarkable for its beauty, but for utility it was all that could be asked.

By the time it was done the ladies were ready to retire, and did so.

"We trust ourselves to you," remarked Miss DeVere, as she bade good-night to the men.

"As Lessing says—Lessing, than whom no figure in all German literature stands out more boldly in relief:

"Keep watch upon your posts, my comrades all, Lest they should fall upon us."

"Good, very good," cried Socrates Sniffin; "you may trust us for that. You seem to have an apt quotation for every emergency. I really remember very little, as compared with you."

"Surely you remember Lessing, Mr. Sniffin," remarked Priestly; "boon companion of Shakespeare's, you know."

Sniffin looked daggers at his tormentor, and Miss DeVere disappeared into the ladies' room, laughing.

CHAPTER XI.

PREPARING FOR TROUBLE.

BELIEVING that the occasion demanded it, Kingsley and Woodland decided to post watchers for the night, taking turns themselves with the others.

They appointed themselves the first watch.

When the others had retired they went outside and took up their station at a little distance from the cabin, seating themselves upon a rock in the deep shadow of the rocky wall.

First, however, they had made sure that their prisoner was safe.

"Now, my friend," Mr. Woodland asked, as soon as they were alone, "what do you think of all this mystery, and what do you think our chances are for getting out of this wild country with our lives? I confess that I am not a little troubled."

"As for the mystery," Kingsley responded, "all that I can say is that it is a mystery, and a deep one, too. Who it can have been that sent us the warning in so peculiar a way, I cannot imagine. As for the chances of our getting out of the trouble alive, I think they are very good. When Old Riddles comes he will be able to advise us what it will be best to do."

"Then you think nothing has happened to him?"

"I do not think anything has, for he is too well posted to allow himself to be drawn into a trap. I look for him at any moment."

"I would be willing to pay a good round sum if I could be lifted up from here and set down in my native State within an hour. When we set out we had no idea that we should fall into any such difficulties as this. Another time I will know better than to conduct ladies into such a wild region."

"This is one of the misfortunes of travel," Kingsley consoled. "You may travel here for years and not meet with the same misfortune again."

"I shall certainly not try it. Let us get out of here this time, and I shall take good care to stay out. Not that I am personally afraid, for I am an old soldier; but I am concerned for the ladies."

"Well, I think we shall come out all right. Keep up your spirits, and it will be time enough to worry when we are in trouble. So far we are all right. We shall—Hark! I hear some one coming."

As he uttered the exclamation, Kingsley sprang to his feet, rifle in hand, and faced toward the quarter whence the sound had come.

In a moment more the figure of a man appeared in the darkness.

"Halt!" Kingsley ordered. "Who are you?"

"Hold on, boy, don't pitch no lead this way," called out the well-known voice of Old Riddles; "it's only me—old Zeb Horn."

"Oh! it is you, is it?" Kingsley greeted, as he lowered his rifle; "we are glad enough to see you back again. We were a little anxious about you."

The old man came up to where they sat, his dog following at his heels, and taking off his hat, proceeded to wipe the perspiration from his heated brow with his hand.

"I am rather glad ter git back, too, I kin tell ye," he declared.

"Where is your prisoner?" Kingsley asked.

"Didn't git him," was the reply. "He giv me th' slip as slick an' clean as ye ever seed. But, what are ye doin' out here with yer guns in yer hands?"

"We are on guard. We have a story to tell you that will surprise you not a little, I think."

"Ye have, eh? So have I got a tale ter on-wind ter you. It will keep fer a few minutes, howsumever, I ruther reckon, seein' as ye are all ready fer danger. Say, if there is any o' that b'ar meat left, jest trot some of it out here. Me an' Napoleon is as hungry as famished wolves."

"You shall have it in one minute," Kingsley promised, and he hastened into the cabin to get it.

When he came out the old ranger and his dog went into the meat as though they had had nothing to eat for a week.

"Jest let me git th' keen edge off o' my hunger," Old Riddles remarked, "an' then I will be ready ter talk to ye."

"Go into it," said Kingsley, "and while you are eating we can be telling our story."

"Yes, that's so; go ahead."

Kingsley did so, telling the old ranger all that had taken place during the evening, and the old man listened eagerly to the story.

"Wal," he observed, when he had heard it all, "that was somethin' of a mystery fer ye ter grapple with, that I allow. I reckon ye don't take no stock in ghosts an' sich like, do ye?"

"Not a bit," declared Kingsley.

"Nor do I," Woodland proclaimed.

"Then that is one p'int settled. I have knowed folks that set everything that they couldn't understand to th' work o' ghosts an' sich like, an' with them sort o' folks I don't have nothin' ter say. There's no use ter argy with 'em, fer they know it all an' more besides. Now, bein' as this wasn't no ghost, ner nothin' in that line, it fol-lers that it was a human critter o' some kind, male, or female, or otherwise."

"Yes agreed Kingsley, laughing, "that is certain."

"An' it follers that since that critter is a friend to us, he can't be much of a friend ter th' Night Hawks. What have ye got ter say on that head?"

"We agree with you there," answered Woodland.

"Then we must conclude that th' critter is either runnin' independent, or else is a traitor in their camp. Which is it?"

"Give it up," said Kingsley. "You are good at riddles, let us have the benefit of your opinion."

"Wal, my opine is that he is a traitor in their camp. As ter whether it is a he or a she, howsumever, I ain't prepared ter say. Th' critter had reason fer not showin' himself here, that is sartain, or else why send th' note in th' queer way he did?"

"That argument is sound enough," assured Woodland.

"It don't amount ter anything," added the old ranger, "so fur as that goes, but it does amount ter somethin' ter know that we have a friend in their camp, an' I think it will be well not ter let our prisoner— By ther way, he is all right, ain't he?"

"Yes," assured Kingsley, "he is with us."

"Good. As I was about ter remark, we'd better not let him find out that we have been warned; fer I take it that he is one of th' Night Hawks, an' if he gits holt o' th' fact that we have a friend at court, it may git our friend in trouble. See? All this, ye see, is countin' that my idee is right."

"That is a very good suggestion," coincided Woodland, "and we had better act upon it; eh, Kingsley?"

"Yes, so we will. But, old man, what of your own adventure?"

"That's so, I did have somethin' ter tell, didn't I; but I was so interested in your story that I forgot all about it. I'll tell it now, an' while I am doin' it you keep yer eyes open fer danger, fer there is goin' ter be music in ther air here afore long."

"You think so?"

"I know so. There will be lively times here afore mornin', sure as ye're born. But, let me get on with my story, fer mebbe I won't have time ter tell it if I don't git down ter business purty quick. When I left you I went around an' up thar where th' shot kem from, makin' my way mighty keeful like, an' purty soon I got my eye onter th' pizen critter that fired at me. I poked my rifle over th' rock an' let him feel it under th' ear, an' he turned 'round as though he war skar't ter death. I invited him ter put up his hands, which he did; an' then I asked him perlately ter step around ter whar I was, which he did not. He motioned that he would have ter go around, fer he was another feller that had lost th' power o' his tongue; an' I told him ter go. He started, an' that was th' last that I see'd o' him. He stooped down, an' that was th' last of him. I waited a minute, mebbe, keepin' my eyes well open fer him, an' then as he didn't show up I went around after him. When I got 'round th' rock he wasn't thar, an' thar was no sign ter show whar he had gone to. It was a puzzler at first, but purty soon Napoleon discovered th' way he had gone. He had jest slipped down th' face of a slantin' rock in front o' him, an' had lit out as nice as ye please. Napoleon an' me set out on his trail ter once, but we didn't git him. We tracked him home, though, an' his home, I take it, is th' headquarters of th' Night Hawks."

"Ha! then you have been to their camp, eh?" exclaimed Kingsley.

"I have fer a fact," the old man assured. "An' thar is whar I got th' pinter that they are comin' here ter-night. They are bound ter rescue their pard that we have got priz'ner, an' then if they kin do it they want ter git a crack at me an' lay me out fer dead. Oh, they have got it all cut an' dried, but I reckon there will be two sides to th' question. I reckon they will find old Zeb Horn on deck, an' ready ter receive 'em with all honors."

"Then they did not discover that you were there?" questioned Woodland.

"Nary time. Ye see me an' Napoleon don't blow a trumpet when we set out on a trip o' that sort, an' they're none th' wiser than they was. I am afeer'd there is lively times ahead fer us, afore we git safely out o' their hands."

"Perhaps you had better let the prisoner go," suggested Woodland.

"Nary a let go," avowed Old Riddles. "That feller kin talk, an' he has got ter talk, too, afore he gets out o' my hands. He is my buffler, he is, an' I want ter comb th' dust out o' his hide afore I let him go. He is got ter tell what they are after me fur, an' don't ye fergit that."

"It was only a suggestion," said Woodland. "I thought that might avert the attack and save us trouble, and perhaps blood."

"They would no doubt attack us anylow," observed Kingsley.

"That's what they would," declared the old ranger. "They have got their eyes sot onter th' women, an' they want ter git ready ter try an' steal some of 'em."

"Heavens!" cried Woodland, "what is to be done?"

"We have got ter fight, if it is necessary," was the response. "We have got ter buckle on our armor, ez it war, an' sell our lives fer th' wimmin, if it comes ter that. I don't keer much fer wimmin, but when it comes ter fightin' fer th' weaker vessels I am right there."

"We can't count much on Duff and Sniffin, I am afraid," observed Woodland.

"Bout what I thought," the old man confessed. "They will have ter take a hand in, though, if it is necessary. But I didn't git quite done with what I was sayin'. There was a party got ready an' started fer here, an' as soon as they had got on th' road I sot out too, an' here I be. Now, that gang will be here in less'n no time, an' we had better hustle round an' git ready fer 'em. Th' fu'st thing ter be did is ter make double sure that that priz'ner is all safe, an' then git our men an' put 'em under arms. We kin do both ter once. I will go an' take a squint at the priz'ner, while you go in an' git out th' men. Don't 'larm th' wimmin."

But little more was said, then, and the three men set to work, and in a few minutes the men of the party were all out and armed, and the old ranger soon joined them, taking charge of his forces like a veteran warrior.

CHAPTER XII.

TAKEN BY SURPRISE.

"Oh dear me," complained Socrates Sniffin, as he handled his rifle rather gingerly, "are we going to have a fight?"

"I sincerely hope not," faltered Barrington Duff.

"You are hopin' against hope," assured the old ranger, "an' th' best thing fer you ter do is ter brace up and let us see what you kin do in a scrimmage. I have no doubt of yer bravery, you know, but that is th' advice I have ter offer, none th' less."

"Oh! I have been in fights before this," boasted Sniffin, "and I am not a bit afraid. What I was thinking about was this being rooted out from sound sleep. I have handled implements of war before to-night."

"Well, even if you have," advised Priestly, "you want to keep that rifle pointed away from this quarter of the camp, if you are going to monkey with it like that. You had better let some one show you how to use it. It is no doubt a kind that you are not used to, or else its use has slipped out of your mind."

"If you attend to your own part of this fight, and do no worse than I shall do," was Sniffin's retort, "you will do well. I only wish I had my case of samples here with me now."

"So do I, sincerely, if that is where you carry your courage," sneered Priestly.

"Why, would you like to borrow a little?" was the retort.

"Come," cried Old Riddles, "this is no time fer you to be fightin' like two young bucks; we have got other things ter attend to. You come on with me and I will put you on duty."

"What is the matter?" cried a voice from the door, and there stood Miss DeVere. "Is there danger?"

It was the loud talking of Sniffin that had apprised the women that something unusual was going on.

"It will be nothing," Sniffin hastened to say. "The Night Hawks are coming, but we will do them up in no time. Retire in all confidence, fair lady."

"Yes," added the old ranger, in no gentle tone; "git in thar, gal, and bar th' door after ye. And what is more, don't you open it fer no one until you hear th' order from me. D'ye understand that?"

"You must obey strictly," added Mr. Woodland.

"Then there is danger?" inquired Miss Drayton, who now joined Miss DeVere.

"Yes, there is danger, Miss Drayton," answered Kingsley, stepping forward; "but we think that we can turn it aside. Do not be alarmed, but retire and fasten the door securely, and do not allow it to be opened unless you recognize the voice of our guide, or Mr. Woodland, or myself."

"It shall be as you have said," was the response, and the two girls withdrew, and the door was closed and secured.

Kingsley tried it and found that it was fastened.

"Come on, now," called out the old guide, "and make as little noise as you can. They ought ter be near here now, and we don't want them to know that we are on th' watch fer 'em. Fall in ahind me and foller."

The old man started off, the others following right after him.

Riddles led the way to a point at a little distance from the cabin, and there stopped.

As has been stated in another place, the cabin could be attacked only from the front, so it was not necessary to guard the rear.

"Now," said the old ranger, "jest form in a line right here, an' I'll unfold my ideas ter ye an' ye kin tell me what they are worth. There, that's it; an' now, let me have yer ears, as th' farmer said ter th' corn. In th' fu'st place, from what I know about this part o' th' kentry,

this is th' way they will come. Mebbe they won't bring their hosses this fur, an' mebbe they will. That don't make no difference, so fur as our leetle skeem is consarned. Ye notice that th' moon is jest comin' up inter sight, an' we will soon have jest th' light that we want ter carry out our plan. We will stand right here in th' shadder till we hear them comin', an' then we will step out an' be ready fer 'em. We will let 'em come on till— Hist! I hear somethin' now."

All listened, and sure enough the sound of horses' tread was plainly heard.

Just a little way from where the defenders were standing the moon cast her light upon the ground for a space of perhaps twenty feet, where her coming found an opening between the hills, and the old ranger quickly moved his force up to that line, stopping them just in the shadow.

"Now," he whispered, "every man ready, and as soon as I give the word I want every man of you ter holler out 'Hands up!' all together, an' in a tone that will show that ye mean business, an' then we will let 'em see our guns in th' moonlight. It will do 'em wonders o' good, I know. Now, all still, an' not another word."

The little line of eight men stood steady and silent, some of them—no need to name the ones—trembling a little, but the others as firm as rocks.

The sound of the horses' tread became plainer and plainer, as the enemy slowly approached, for they were coming at a walk, and ere long they could be seen.

"Ready, now," whispered Old Riddles, "and as soon as I give the word, step out an' show yerselves. Let every gun cover a man."

In about one minute more the horsemen came up, and the old ranger gave the looked-for signal.

Out into the edge of the moonlight stepped the line of men, their rifles at their shoulders, and all together they uttered the command:

"Halt! Up with your hands!"

If there was ever a surprise-party, that was it. The horsemen were just out into the full glare of the moonlight, there was not the least chance for them to get out of the trap, and with muttered curses they brought their horses to a sudden stop and put up their hands as ordered.

"Good-evenin', Night Hawks," the old ranger saluted; "how d'ye find yerselves ter-night? We hope ye are well, but we ain't prepared ter say how long ye will be onless ye do jest as we tell ye ter do."

The rascals had their masks on, so there was no chance for them to deny their identity, although they were foolish enough to try to do so.

"Night Hawks yourselves," cried their leader; "who in blazes are you?"

"What," ejaculated Old Riddles, in feigned surprise, "ain't you a band o' outlaws called th' Night Hawks?"

"No, we ain't; but who are you?"

"Then who be ye?" the old man demanded, still ignoring their questions.

"Why, we are deputy-sheriffs, out after this band you speak of. If you is them you had better surrender mighty quick, or it will be th' wuss fer ye."

"Ha, ha, ha!" the old ranger laughed, "this is th' first time that I ever see men o' th' law ashamed ter show their faces. What have ye got masks on fer?"

"Why, we wanted ter hide our 'dentity, fer good reasons. But, who in blazes are you?"

"I am old Zeb Horn, commonly called Old Riddles," was the reply, "an' this is my party. We're glad ter see you, sheriffs, right glad ter see ye indeed. Sorry ye didn't find Old Zeb asleep, but he ain't ter be caught that way."

"Well, put up your guns and let us ride on."

"Ha, ha, ha! you pizen varmint, you infarnel fools! what d'ye take us fer? Don't ye s'pose we knows ye? Don't ye s'pose we know what ye're here fer? Ye kem here with th' idee o' gittin' away with our priz'ner, an' then ter git a crack at my kerkiss if ye could. An' not only that, but yer pizen leader told ye ter take th' measure of our strength an' see what th' chances would be fer ter steal one of our winnemen critters from us. Oh, we knows ye, we does, an' there is no use in yer tryin' ter choke no sich stuff down our necks as ye are tryin' ter choke down."

The rascals looked from one to another in surprise and disgust. What was the meaning of this? How had this man learned of their coming, and how had he learned what they were there for so accurately? It was something they could not understand.

Old Riddles knew enough of human nature to know what their thoughts were most likely to be, and he said:

"I am somethin' of a prophet, I am, an' I know 'most everything. I kin tell ye what ye're thinkin' about now. Ye're wonderin' how in the Old Boy I found out that ye was comin', an' what ye was comin' fur. Oh, ye can't fool Old Riddles, an' th' best thing ye kin do is not ter show yer homely mugs around here again. That is a fair warnin', an' we hope ye will have sense enough ter heed it."

"You're away off th' mark, old man," blurted the leader, "an you had better let us go right on or you will be getting yourself inter trouble."

"Ho, ho, ho! you are in a purty fix ter talk about puttin' any one else inter trouble, now ain't ye. Ye had better git out o' yer own fix fu'st."

"Well, what are you going to do about it, then?"

"That is jest what I am about ter show ye now. Kingsley, you jest step out to 'em, an' take every weepin' an' bit o' ammunition you kin find on 'em. Sich things will come in powerful handy ter us. Th' rest of ye keep 'em covered with yer guns, an' th' fu'st one of th' pizen critters that pulls his hand down one inch, jest plug him. I reckon that is plain talk enough fer you fellers ter onderstand, ain't it? Jest be keeful not ter let yer hands drop, fer it will be sure death if ye do."

Kingsley laid down his rifle and drew a revolver, and stepping forward he began to take the outlaws' weapons away from them with a will. He took not only their weapons, but, as the old guide had directed, their ammunition as well.

It took him but a few minutes to do the work, and the rascals were completely disarmed and helpless.

The weapons and ammunition were laid in a heap upon the ground before them.

"How d'ye feel now?" the old ranger asked. "Don't ye feel ruther cheap? It is a case of th' biter bit, I ruther reckon. Now git down off'n them 'ar hosses, every mother's son of ye, an' don't be long about it, nuther."

"What, ye don't mean ter take our hosses, do ye?" the leader demanded.

"That is jest what we do, so there needn't be any misunderstandin' about it. You didn't hesertate ter take 'em from th' wimmin the other day, an' I reckon it is jest about as fair one way as it was t'other."

Very reluctantly the men dismounted, and stood by in a group while Kingsley secured their horses.

When this was done, the old ranger remarked:

"Now, my posies, you kin take th' back trail fer yer den jest as soon as ye want ter. We are done with ye. An' don't fergit that it won't be very healthy fer ye ter come round here again."

"If you do," added Kingsley, "we may take something that you think more of than you do of your horses and weapons."

"Jest so," supplemented the old man, "an' don't fail ter bring a supply o' rope with ye, fer mebbe we won't have enough fer neckties all around."

"You shall answer fer this," the man threatened as they walked sullenly away, "an' answer fer it dear, too. You will find that it don't pay ter tread on th' corns o' the Night Hawks."

Like so many whipped curs the outlaws slunk away, Old Riddles and his party laughing at and sneering after them as long as they could be seen. Then they gathered up the weapons and returned to the cabin, leading the horses after them. Socrates Sniffin leading the way and whistling "Behold The Conquering Hero Comes."

CHAPTER XIII.

NIGHT VISITOR.

"THAT is what I would call a mighty clever trick, my old friend," complimented Kingsley, addressing Old Riddles, as they walked along.

"It will pass as sich, perhaps," was the response.

"Do you think they will trouble us again?" inquired Woodland.

"I don't reckon they will trouble us ag'in ter-night," was the answer, "but I ain't prepared ter say what they will do ter-morrer or ter-morrer night."

"Then you think we shall have more trouble with them, do you?"

"I should be s'prised if we hadn't. They ain't th' sort o' men ter let us git away with them in this style without tryin' ter square th' account. We shall have ter be on th' lookout fer 'em fer all we are worth. We are better fixed than we wur, though, fer we have got more arms an' ammernition."

"Don't you think it will be well for me and my party to set out immediately for some point of safety?" Woodland anxiously asked.

"With a lot o' wimmin, an' at night; no, sir, I don't. You couldn't lay enough distance behind you to put ye out o' their reach, an' they might git ye in a worse place than this is. You had better stay right here, till we see what kin be done, an' it will give us time ter arrange fer leavin' when a better chance turns up. When they come ter tackle us ag'in I have an idee that they will git a stummick full o' th' job, an' will be glad ter leave us alone."

"Well, it must be as you say, of course, but it seems to me that it is all our fault that you are in danger."

"That is where you make your mistake. They had begun target practice at me afore you kem around at all. An', by th' way, that reminds me that that priz'ner has got ter do

some talkin' an' onwind a leetle tale fer us, so's we will know what they mean by all their kindly attentions."

"Do you think you shall be able to make him talk?"

"I ruther think I shall. He will be glad enough ter wag his jaw when I git at him in earnest."

"You will try a little Western style of suasion with him, I have no doubt," observed Mr. Kendrick.

"That is about th' idee," the old man acknowledged.

All had more or less to say on the subject, but the old ranger did not reveal what his plan was.

When they arrived at the cabin they found the women all up and anxiously awaiting their return, and they were all badly frightened, for hearing the horses coming they thought that their enemy was at hand. They soon heard familiar voices, however, and were then more at ease.

"Open the door," called out Mr. Woodland, "for it is we. We are all safe and sound, and have had a bloodless victory."

Still whistling, Socrates Sniffin advanced to the door, knocked, and said:

"Yes, the victory is ours, and here we are with our spoils of war. Come out, fair ladies, and congratulate us. More worthy warriors never returned to Rome."

The door was opened as hurriedly as possible, and Miss De Vere was the first to come out. The others were right behind her, for it was a relief to them to know that the danger was over and that it was safe for them to show themselves.

"Brave men!" exclaimed the gushing Miss De Vere, "brave men, indeed! If I had a wreath of laurel, Mr. Sniffin, I would hang it on your brow. I would, indeed; pray believe me. Allow me to congratulate you, one and all."

The other ladies were not slow to express their thanks, and the men of the party felt well paid for what they had done!

All the credit of the affair was given to Old Riddles, and each of the ladies had to take his hand and thank him a little extra, a proceeding which made the old ranger very ill at ease.

"Thar, thar, that will do," he exclaimed, "that will do. We ha'n't done no sich great thing, fer it was as easy as nothin'. Don't say nothin' more about it."

"I am so glad it was no worse," observed Barrington Duff to Miss Flint. "If harm had come to you I would never know peace—"

"There, now, don't go to getting soft," the elderly maiden interrupted, "for if there is anything that I do hate in a man it is softness."

"Surely you will not consider it softness if I tell you how glad I am that we kept danger away from you, will you?" interposed Major Kendrick.

"You needn't say anything about it," was the retort. "Really I do not know which of you is the softest. I wish you would not annoy me all the time with your attentions, for if there is any one thing that I hate, it is a spoony man."

Old Riddles happened to be standing right near when these remarks were made, and he looked at Miss Flint as though he would like to say:

"You have got hoss sense, you have; more hoss sense than any other female critter that I ever see."

Mr. and Mrs. Woodland, with Philip Kingsley and Blanche Drayton, formed a group by themselves, and whatever they had to say was not heard by the others.

Terrill and Priestly, with Sniffin and Miss De Vere, made another party, and there was again a tilt between Priestly and Sniffin, into which German literature found its way as a matter of course.

The old ranger put up with all for some time, though he had little patience with such "squaw palaver," as he mentally termed it, and then he called out:

"Soon as th' rest of ye kin git away from th' wimmin, boyees, it won't be a bad idee ter git th' rest of this work off'n our hands. Don't hurry yerselves in th' least, howsumever, fer it won't take long ter stand out here all night."

This raised a laugh, but all took the hint, and the ladies soon retired into the cabin again, after which the old ranger and the others of the men who knew anything about such work, proceeded to secure their horses for the night.

Stakes were driven into the ground out in the rear of the cabin, and there the animals were tethered.

It was a safe place, for there was no way in which it could be approached from the rear, and the front was to be guarded.

When this had been done, and well done, as the old ranger made it his business to know, and their prisoner had once more been attended to, to make sure that there was no chance of his getting away, all sought the cabin, except the guardsmen, and in a very short time all was silence.

The guardsmen for this part of the night were Priestly and Terrill, after whom came Kendrick

and Sniffin. The last watch was taken by Kingsley and the old ranger.

There was no further excitement during the night, and in due season the sun rose bright and clear.

All came forth feeling very much refreshed, with a hearty good-morning for one another, and all were chatting away merrily in front of the cabin, when suddenly their attention was drawn to a notice that was posted on the door, and which no one had until this moment seen.

It read as follows:

"You had better not try to leave the valley for a time. You will only place yourselves in the hands of the Hawks if you do. I will try to let you know when it will be best to start."

There was some excitement then, as may well be imagined. How had this notice come on the door when there had been a guard posted constantly? Priestly and Terrill were positive that no one had been around during their watch, and it is needless to say that the old ranger and Kingsley were the same. Kendrick and Sniffin, too, made the same statement, but the other four looked upon their watch with suspicion. This raised the ire in the major's breast, and he vowed then and there that he would never again watch with Sniffin.

Sniffin, therefore, had to stand the brunt of the suspicion, though Priestly tried to lighten it for him by remarking that no doubt the peculiar importance of keeping awake when on guard duty had got out of his mind during his active business career.

This was greeted with a howl, and as the visitor had been a friend instead of a foe, the matter was overlooked.

There was no signature to the notice, but the writing proved it to have been put there by the same person who had sent the message of fire on the previous evening.

"There is a leetle more mystery goin' on 'round here than I am used to," commented the Rocky Ranger, later, "an' a good deal more than I like. There has got ter be a grand clearin' up, an' that afore many moons, too."

"I am agreed with you on that point," declared Kingsley, "and I think the sooner we take some steps to clear it up and get this party safely out of the hills, the better."

"Right you are, but, as I said last night, an' as our mysterious friend has told us, it won't do ter venture out o' sich a good place as this till we have a good chance o' gettin' clear. Them Night Hawks is too many fer us, with th' material we have got ter back us. Some on us ain't none too brave, ter say nothin' about some on us bein' wuss'n that."

The ranger and Kingsley were speaking now in private.

"What do you mean?" Kingsley asked.

"Jest what I say."

"You will have to make it a little clearer than that, for I do not catch on at all."

"Well, then, there is one man in this camp that I wouldn't trust out o' sight, an' that is th' gilt-edge truth."

"Who is that?"

"It is that one called Terrill."

"Ha! then you think he is not to be trusted, eh?"

"That is jest it. Not that I know anything about th' man, but Old Riddles don't come fur wrong, as a gen'l rule."

"Well, we shall have to keep our eyes upon him, then. But, have you any idea who this mysterious friend of ours can be?"

"Nary. I can't offer no more of an opine than I did before. It must be a traitor in their camp, or else some feller that is runnin' independent on his own hook. I ain't prepared ter say which it is, but I ruther think it a traitor in their den. I would like ter git hold o' him, or her, whichever it is, an' mebbey I'd be able ter git some information out o' him."

"Well, for the present, old man, let us see about something to eat. I will go for water [there was a stream just back of the cabin], and you see if you can get enough off of that bear meat for breakfast. No doubt all are hungry enough."

"I reckon they be, ter judge by my own feelin's on th' subject," the old man responded, and preparations for breakfast were begun at once.

It did not take long to make it ready, and all ate heartily of the plain fare that was put before them, and were as lively as though there was no danger near them, nor had been any.

As soon as the old ranger had had his fill, he went out and fed the prisoner, informing him that as soon as he had eat he would try to teach him to talk a little, a statement which the man did not seem to relish.

CHAPTER XIV.

MAKING THE DUMB SPEAK.

WHILE the prisoner was eating, the old ranger was busy at work preparing what he called his "gentle preswader."

Kingsley, understanding what his plan was, was assisting him, while all the rest of the party, except Terrill, who had volunteered to go out with his rifle in the hope of finding something in the way of game, were looking on.

The first thing the two men did was to fix a

stake in the ground, one that stood about five feet high when they were done. Then they began to pile brush up around it.

"Mercy me!" exclaimed Deborah Flint, who was the first to guess what the intention of the old ranger was, "they are going to burn him at the stake."

"Right you are, m'am," owned Riddles, in a tone loud enough for the prisoner to hear him. "He has either got ter talk or die, an' it don't make no difference to me which it is."

Of course this was not strictly true. They had no intention whatever of taking the man's life, much less of burning him at the stake; but the old guide thought this would prove the quickest and surest way of inducing him to open his mouth.

"Oh! you horrid thing!" cried Miss De Vere, "you surely do not mean it. You cannot be so cruel."

"That is no more cruel than it was fer him ter try ter drop a lump o' lead inter me," argued the ranger, "an' if you ladies don't want ter hear him holler, you had better go inter the cabin an' shut th' door an' plug yer ears. Th' feller has got ter suffer, an' no mistake."

"Oh, but to burn him at the stake is something dreadful."

"So it is somethin' dreadful ter have lead pitched inter ye, miss," returned the old man, "an' he order thought o' that when he was so mighty eager ter make a sperrit o' me."

Miss Drayton turned to Kingsley to learn whether the old ranger really meant what he said, and read the truth in his laughing eyes at once.

"Would it not do better to hang him," suggested Miss Flint, "since you are determined that he must die?"

"Bless ye, no," was the reply. "If we choke off his wind he won't be able ter say anything even if he wants ter. No, he must burn, an' that settles it."

Mrs. Woodland tried to induce her husband to interfere, but he declined to do so. He was able to assure her, however, that he thought it was intended only to scare the man into a confession.

Priestly and Sniffin had their little tilt, as usual, while the arrangements were being made, into which Miss De Vere dropped grains of wisdom from her store of knowledge of German literature, and Kendrick and Duff tried their hardest to make themselves agreeable to Miss Flint.

In a short time the torture-stake was ready, and the prisoner was led out.

There was a look of terror in the man's eyes, but his face bore an expression of disbelief mingled with hope, as though he thought it could not be their intention to burn him to death.

"Now, ladies," announced Old Riddles, "there is goin' ter be a scene here that you won't wantter witness, fer if ye do it will ha'n't ye as long as ye live. That bein' th' case, ye had better git inter th' cabin an' not come out till th' man is dead an' buried."

The old mountaineer spoke in all earnestness of tone, and the face of the prisoner grew pale.

"Yes," added Kingsley, "you had better go in and shut the door, ladies, for his cries will no doubt chill your blood."

"Oh! this is horrible!" cried Miss De Vere. "Will you not spare him the torture and shoot him instead?"

"Yes," pleaded Miss Flint, "do shoot him instead."

"Can't be did," declared Riddles, sternly; "he has ter burn, an' that settles it."

Miss Drayton caught hold of Deborah, Mrs. Woodland doing the same with Olivia, and they were quickly run into the cabin, where a few words of explanation set the two ladies' fears at rest.

"Now, my man," said the old ranger, as soon as the ladies had disappeared. "I will give you an outline o' th' programme. We have an idee that you kin talk if ye want ter, an' we have made up our minds that you have got ter talk or else die at th' stake. Which will ye have?"

The man grew still paler, and groaned dismally.

"Can't talk, eh?" the ranger queried.

The man shook his head "No."

"Then ye'll surely have ter burn. We're sorry as kin be, but that don't alter th' case any, an' there is no help for ye."

The terrified man was led forward to the stake and securely tied to it, all the time making the valley hideous with his moaning and groaning.

As soon as he was tied fast the wood was piled up around him, and it looked decidedly like business.

"Kin ye talk yet?" the old man asked, when this was done.

Again the wretch shook his head, not only once but several times, and opened his mouth wide and protruded his tongue, as though to call attention to the truth of his statement—if it may be called that.

"That is bad fer ye, very bad," was the comment. "You will surely have ter go up in smoke."

"Is it not possible that the poor wretch is

telling the truth?" remarked Mr. Woodland to Kingsley, as they stood a little back from the place of torture.

"Yes, it is possible that he may be," was Kingsley's reply, "but I think the same as the old man. I think he can talk fast enough if he wants to."

"Suppose that you are mistaken, though; it will be horrible to burn him."

"Oh! we do not intend to burn him. The first lick of the fire will show us whether he can talk or not."

While this conversation was going on, the old guide was lighting the pile. With face as stern and hard as iron he applied the match, and a little sheet of flame sprung up and began to lick its way toward the trembling wretch at the stake.

"Thar she goes," the old man observed coolly, as he stepped back, "an' if ye really can't talk, I feel mighty sorry fer you. It is either talk or burn, an' that is all there is to it."

The poor fellow's cries, groans, moanings, etc., were pitiful to hear, but his captors stood and looked at him in grim silence. His face was as pale as death, the perspiration stood out upon his forehead, he rolled his eyes and protruded his tongue, and his whole manner went to indicate that he was dumb indeed.

"Ugh! I can't stand any more of this!" exclaimed Socrates Sniffin, and he made a break for the cabin immediately.

"No, nor I!" cried Barrington Duff and he too hastened away.

Priestly, Kendrick and Woodland too, drew further away, leaving the old ranger and Kingsley responsible for the outcome of their work.

"What do you think about him old man?" Kingsley whispered, as they stood together.

"I don't know what ter think of him the ranger confessed in the same 'ow tone. Th' fuss he is makin', an' th' way he looks, makes me think that mebbly he is sure-enough dumb after all."

"Then it will not do to let him get burned."

"No, I will look out fer that. It is no doubt jest beginnin' ter feel a little warm but I kin tell by his face when it bites."

The flame was by this time beginning to burn up with more spirit, and it was time that the man spoke out if he could talk at all.

Old Riddles walked forward leisurely, took up an armful of brush that he had reserved for the purpose, and threw it upon the pile right in front of his victim. At the same time a tongue of flame darted out and stung the fellow sharply on the leg.

This was the last test, and unless the man gave in, the old ranger was ready to kick the fire away in a moment more.

But this test was sufficient. To see the additional fuel piled on, and to feel the tongue of flame bite his leg, broke the fellow's nerve, and loudly he bellowed:

"Help! help! Don't let me burn! I'll talk!"

The old ranger sprung forward and kicked the wood away from around him, and remarked:

"I was purty sartain you could talk, an' now you have got ter talk or you will have ter burn fer sure. That is ther gilt-edge truth."

The immediate danger over, and the heat gone, the man looked as though he would like to have some one kick him for giving in, for he could now see, even as he had believed before, that they had no intention of burning him. Now that they *knew* he could talk, however, he knew they would make him do so.

"Wal, what d'ye want me ter say?" he asked sullenly.

"We want a straight story out of ye," was the reply. "We want th' hull truth, an' nothin' but th' truth. We know who an' what ye are, an' we want ter know what ye was sent here ter shoot me fer."

"Ye say ye know who I am?"

"Yes, sure pop."

"Who am I?"

"Yer name is Burke, an' you are one of th' Night Hawks. You an' a feller by name o' Ben kem up here yesterday ter put me out o' th' way, but ye didn't do it. You got nabbed, an' Ben struck out fer home, after he had made a mess o' th' thing same as you did, only wuss. D'ye see them 'ar hosses over thar? They was captured last night from a party o' your friends that kem here with th' idee that they could git ye out o' our hands. They got left, an' left bad. Now, what was ye sent here ter kill me fer? Don't ye try ter lie, fer ef ye do I'll put back th' wood an' let you roast."

"Wal, you have got me in a bad fix," the man owned, "an' I s'pose I might as well onwind, bein' as I can't help myself."

"That is hoss sense; go right ahead."

"I am one of th' Night Hawks, an' there is about twenty of us, all told. Th' leader's name is Captain Red-hand. That is, that is what he is called. I s'pose he has some other name, but if he has I don't know what it is. We have been plyin' our trade up in th' Park region of late, but th' captain had word of some fat game down on this trail, an' so we kem down. Ye see Utah Dave is one of his men, an' him an' one other feller set out ter take these folks that are here with you down inter Arizony. It was all cut an' dried, an' when Dave had got 'em

down here jest where th' captain wanted 'em, he left 'em an' kem over to our side, an' we went fer 'em."

"You worthless dog, you!" Old Riddles exclaimed in indignation, "you deserve to be hanged."

"Mebby I do," was the return; "but if I make a clean breast of th' whole biz, will ye let up on me?"

"Yes, if you will tell th' whole story, an' tell it straight, we will let up on you."

"All right, I'll do it."

The other men of the party had now returned to the scene, and all stood around to hear the miserable rascal's confession.

CHAPTER XV.

DEATH AT THE STAKE.

"I HAVE told you th' most of it already," the fellow began, "but there is some more p'int ter be added to it."

"There is one p'int that I will keep you in mind of," declared the old ranger, "an' that one is ter explain why they wanted ter git me out o' th' way."

"And another," added Kingsley, "is to give us the name of the man who aided Utah Dave in his rascally work."

"It was more like th' man that Dave helped," the outlaw observed; "but, I'd give ye th' hull racket."

"Go ahead."

"Wal, th' name of th' other man is Walden Terrill. He was at Denver, with Utah Dave, layin' fer some kind o' game ter turn up, when this Mr. Woodland an' his party made known their wants fer a guide. Terrill played his keurds mighty well, an' got on th' right side o' th' party. Then he interdoosed Utah Dave, an' they roped 'em in in fine style."

"The rascals!" Woodland cried. "They were well recommended to me, and I took Utah Dave in good faith."

"Yes, Dave had a purty good name, but that was jest whar he helped th' captain th' most. If his party didn't promise much, they got through with Dave as their guide all right; but if they was any way well fixed, they gen'ly fell inter th' hands of th' Hawks."

"Where is the rascal now?" demanded Woodland, turning to Kingsley.

"He set out to look for some game," Kingsley explained.

"Yes," declared the outlaw, "an' he has gone so fur that you ain't likely ter see him again in a hurry. He has left ye an' gone over to th' captain."

"How do you know that?" asked the old ranger.

"He kem an' told me last night. When it was his watch he kem round ter where I was ter see if I was all right, as he told th' other feller, an' he would ha' let me off then, only he was afeerd o' bein' caught at it, as there was only th' one way fer me ter git away. He told me that you would try ter make me talk this mornin', but told me ter hold out, fer he didn't think you would hurt me much. I had ter cave when ye got at me in 'arnest, though, so you have got th' hull facts in th' case."

"Th' infarnel p'izen varmint!" grated Old Riddles. "If I had him here this minute I would wring his neck fer him."

"It would serve him right," agreed Woodland.

"You remember what I said ter you this mornin', don't ye?" asked the old man, turning to Kingsley.

"Yes, and it seems that you were right," Kingsley answered.

"But, that don't tell why th' p'izen critters wanted ter kill me," reminded the old man, turning back to the prisoner. "So go on with yer story."

"Why, ye see th' captain has heard tell o' you afore, an' he knows that there ain't a great deal o' show fer him ter do as he pleases till you are out o' his way. When he found that th' party had fell in with you he made up his mind that you had ter be killed. Hesent me an' Ben Denning cut ter do th' job, but we made a mess of it, an' I got th' wu'st o' th' bargain."

"Ding bast his eyes!" the mountaineer thundered, "there will be a settlin' o' 'counts atween him an' me, an' don't ye fergit it. When any enemy o' mine takes that sort o' notion inter his head th' hills ain't big enough to hold us both. You kin bet that yer Captain Red-hand has got ter suffer. But, what does he intend ter do?"

"Why, he an' his pets hes made up their minds that they want th' wimmin o' yer party, th' young ones, an' they think as soon as you are out o' th' way it won't be a hard matter to git 'em."

"Yes, I see; but Old Zeb Horn is on deck yet, an' he means ter stay on deck, too."

"Do you know anything about who it is that is warning us against this Captain Red-hand?" asked Kingsley.

"No, that is a puzzler ter me. Terrill told me about it, an' that is one reason why he set off so soon ter join th' captain. He was goin' ter stay here an' play traitor in this camp till they could git away with th' gals, but he didn't know what trouble he would be gittin' inter if he did, fer he was afeerd that th' strange letter-

sender might expose him. It is a mystery ter me as much as it is to you. I am givin' it ter ye straight."

"Is that all you have got ter tell?" asked Old Riddles.

"That is all that I kin think of, but if you have anything ter ask don't be afeerd ter let it out, an' I will tell all I kin. There is no use in tryin' ter hold anything back now."

"Are there any women in the outlaw camp?" asked Kingsley.

"Not a one," was the reply.

"Is there any one there whom you would suspect of playing traitor?"

"Not a one, so fur as I can think. I don't know of one that would dare to."

"Now," the old ranger put, "what are we to do with you?"

"I give it up," answered the man.

"You can't go back to th' outlaw camp, can you?"

"Nary."

"And we don't want you here very bad. If I was ter give ye a hoss an' tell ye ter git, would ye go?"

"I would git, you bet," was the reply.

"An' where would you set out fer?"

"I think I would strike fer th' south. Anyhow, I would put distance atween me an' th' Night Hawks as fast as possible, that you kin rely on."

"Then I think that is what we will have ter do with ye. Ye are no use ter us, for we wouldn't trust ye, an' ye want ter onderstand that we don't want ter see you around here again. If we do it won't be healthy fer you, that's all."

"Oh, I won't trouble you no more, so don't worry about that."

The old ranger now turned to Kingsley, and asked him to bring a horse, and was then about to step forward to loose the man from the stake, when the fellow gave a sudden start and sunk down with a groan. Then followed instantly the report of a rifle.

The man was shot.

Instantly the old ranger looked in the direction from which the sound came, and saw a little cloud of smoke curling up from a point up on the side of the mountain to the west.

"Blast their sassy picters!" he cried, "if they ain't shot him."

Kingsley stopped and ran back.

"Is he hurt badly?" he asked.

"Yes," was the reply, as the old man made a hasty examination. "It has bit him right in th' heart."

"Then he is dead?"

"Yes. An we had better git out o' range, or we may git th' same dose."

They retreated toward the cabin in all haste, but before they had reached it they heard some one calling to them, and stopped.

Looking back, they saw a man waving to them from a point very near to where the fatal shot had come from.

And that man was Walden Terrill!

"Th' pizen critter," the ranger grated, "what kin he mean by that?"

Terrill was pointing with one hand, pointing away behind him, while with the other he was motioning for those in the valley to come up.

"Can it be that he saw who shot the man, and wants us to come and help him capture him?" suggested Woodland.

"It is just likely he did the shooting himself," commented Kingsley.

"That is where yer head is level," agreed the old man. "If he had seen th' deed done, an' was an honest man, he would ha' captured th' pizen critter that did it, or else he'd 'a' shot him on th' spot. No, sir-ee! he is ther feller that done it, an' that I am willin' ter bet on. If he wanted us ter come an' captur' any one, he wouldn't stand thar an' holler like a blame fool. Nevertheless, I'll answer his signal an' won't let on that I know what he is up ter."

So saying, the old man took off his hat and waved it, and Terrill then motioned more vigorously than ever.

"That is all right, my pippin," the old man commented, "but you can't fool us no longer. Howsumever, I'll take my rifle an' start up thar an' then we'll see if you kin dispute the proof we have ag'in' ye."

"I wouldn't do it," warned Kingsley. "He may want to draw you up there to serve you in the same way."

"I won't give him much of a chance ter do that, fer I will come upon him in a way that he ain't lookin' fer. We won't let on ter him that we know anything th' feller has told us, an' I will keep my eye onter him an' see what he means ter do."

"Do you mean to allow him to come back here to our camp?" asked Woodland.

"Why not? He can't do no harm now, bein' as we kin look out fer him."

"It looks to me like a very unwise thing to do."

"Not so at all. If we git hold o' him we kin keep him, an' he kin do us less harm fastened up out thar in th' old stable than he kin ef we let him go. You stay here an' I'll go fer him."

Calling his dog, the old mountaineer started,

and in a few minutes was lost to sight of those at the cabin.

"I fear he is running into trouble this time," observed Kingsley, as he looked after him.

"So do I," agreed Woodland, "but what can we do? He is bound to have his own way."

Riddles kept well under cover all the way around to a point where he set out to ascend, and from there he was more careful than ever. He kept a sharp lookout for danger, but saw no suspicious signs, and in a short time came out in sight of where the rascally Terrill was standing.

The young man was leaning upon his rifle, waiting for him.

"Hello, there you are, eh?" the old ranger saluted. "Did you see that cowardly shot that laid our priz'ner out?"

"No," was the reply, "but I heard it, and saw the fellow sink down at the torture-stake. I had just come out here where I could see what you were doing, and had been here only an instant when the shot was fired. It came from right over there, and I got just a glimpse of a man as he got up and ran off."

"Why didn't ye p'ug him?"

"He was out of sight before I had time to do it."

"Kin ye show me about whar he stood?"

"Yes; it was right over there," pointing.

"All right. Jest come over there an' we'll see if Napoleon kin pick up the trail!"

The young villain saw instantly that he had overreached himself, but there was no backing out now, since he had gone so far, so, with pale face, he led the way to a spot where he declared was the exact place where he had seen the man disappear.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHO FIRED THE SHOT.

"ALL right," said the old man, "we will see what th' dog kin tell us."

Calling the attention of the dog to what was required, he bade it hunt the trail, which the faithful brute at once undertook to do.

It ran around and around, smelling here and there, until it had gone over a circle of perhaps twenty yards, and then it stopped and gave vent to a howl.

There was no trail there to be found.

And no wonder. Having seen his mistake, the rascal was not fool enough to take the dog to the place where he had stood only a few minutes before, for he knew well enough that that trail would lead right back to the camp the way he had come out.

"He can't seem to find it," he remarked.

"No, fer he is a fool-dog sometimes," declared Old Riddles, in pretended disgust. "Napoleon, ye fool ye, what ails ye? Come, we might as well git back ter th' cabin, young man, fer th' feller has had time enough ter git too fur away by this time fer us ter ketch him. Come on."

"It is very strange that the dog can't find the trail," Terrill observed, "for I am sure that is the place where the man stood."

"Yes, it is strange," the old man agreed.

Little more was said until they came near the cabin, where they met some of the others of the party, who tried not to let the rascal see that he was in any way suspected, though it was hard work for them to do so.

When they came to the place where the dead man was still at the stake, Terrill stopped.

"Is he dead?" he asked.

"Yes, deader'n a hammer," was the reply. "Whoever did th' job didn't make any bad mess of it."

"Do you think the shot was fired by the same person who has been shooting at you?"

"Well, hardly. Mebbe it was our mysterious friend."

"True enough," the young man agreed, glad to get hold of something on which to build; "that is, no doubt, the true solution of it."

"But what did he shoot him for?" Kingsley put in.

"Perhaps he thought he would tell something that the person did not want us to know," hinted Woodland.

"That may explain it," said Terrill, catching on at once. "By the way, did you get anything out of him?"

"We might have learned much more," replied Kingsley, "if he had not been cut off so suddenly."

"Then you did get hold of something, eh?"

"Yes, a little; just enough to make us want to know more. Too bad you were not here. You missed all the fun."

"I saw a little of it, for I came out there on the side of the hill just a few moments before the shot was fired."

"Strange I didn't see you, then," observed Old Riddles, "fer I looked around jest about as soon as it was fired. An' it is a wonder th' other feller didn't see ye. But, that don't matter; th' deed is did, an' that is all there is about it."

They stopped there and took the body down from the stake, the old ranger laying it out on the ground with as much care as though

it were the body of a friend instead of that of an enemy.

While he was at work thus, his thoughts were not idle. He was wondering why Terrill had changed his mind and had returned, instead of going to the outlaw camp as he had told the prisoner he intended doing.

"He no doubt changed his mind, as every critter has a right ter do," he decided; "but I am no prophet if he ain't sorry he did so afore very long."

The whole party, ladies and all, were now collected round the dead man, and there was a solemn hush resting over all. For once, at least, Miss De Vere had no quotation to offer from the German classics, and Sniffin and Priestly were at peace.

A piece of blanket was thrown over the body for the present, preparatory to its burial, and attention was given to digging a grave. Two hours later the dead man was buried, and Terrill seemed to draw a breath of relief when the grave had been filled and rounded over.

"This is solemn bizness," observed the old ranger, when the work was completed; "but it is one less enemy fer us ter corntend ag'inst. I couldn't weep more'n a bucketful o' tears if th' hull gang of 'em had met th' same fate."

Kingsley and some of the others attended to the horses, and when that was done they were all at liberty to collect in front of the cabin to talk over the events of the last few hours.

It soon became apparent that Terrill wanted to learn what their plans were for the future. He made two or three propositions, none of which was received with favor, and then gave way to let some one else take the lead.

Those who were in the secret saw plainly that the confession of the prisoner had been true, and it was clear to them that this was the one who had fired the fatal shot. In their minds there was no doubt about it. And now it seemed plain that the fellow had come back to learn what he could of their plans for the future.

Kingsley, who had studied Old Riddles not a little, saw that it was hard for the old man to resist the desire he felt to open on the rascal and let him know the truth, and that his game was known.

"By th' way," he remarked, presently, "ye didn't see any game, did ye?" addressing Terrill.

"No, none at all," was the reply. "I think I will try it again after a little while. We might go out together, if it is agreeable to you."

"Which it ain't," was the answer. "I have got my hands full right here. I am of th' opine that we shall have ter live on hoss flesh fer a time. An' as I am at th' head o' this camp, by right o' years as well as position an' experience, I don't want anybody else ter go out. There is too much o' this shootin' goin' on ter make it at all healthy. You will have ter stay in, with th' rest of us. No knowin' when we shall have a visit from th' outlaws, an' we want every man we kin get hold of. Ain't I in about th' right of it, Mr. Kingsley?"

"That is certainly a good idea," agreed Kingsley, "for if one of us should go out and not return, we could not spare any help to go and look for him."

Terrill was now decidedly pale, and his voice was husky as he spoke.

"Your idea is all right, old man," he said, "but you want to remember that I am not under you, and that I shall go out if I want to, so long as it is my risk and not yours."

"You had better follow the plans of our friend," said Mr. Woodland. "I, as the head of my party, consider myself under his directions while I am under his protection, and there is no reason why you should not be. If we have to eat horse flesh, well and good. We will call it buffalo, and think no more about it for conscience' sake."

The rascal was beat all around. He could go no further without showing his colors right out, and that, of course, he dared not do.

"Well, I suppose I shall have to go with the the majority, though I do not relish the idea of it," he said.

"That is more like boss sense, whether ye mean it or not," declared Riddles, "an' we hope ye do."

The rascal knew not what to reply to this, and wisely said nothing, for the old man's blood was boiling, and Kingsley expected every moment to see him place Terrill under arrest. So hot was he with indignation, that for the time being even the presence of the ladies made little impression on him. Under ordinary circumstances he would have held himself as far away from the group as possible.

Gradually the line of conversation changed, no plans of action having been settled upon further than that they would remain where they were for the present, and the ladies began to take the lead.

Kingsley found it no trouble to engage the attention of Miss Drayton, for on her part she seemed perfectly willing to meet him half way. They were coming to be excellent friends. Little did either imagine the revelations that were in store for them.

Miss Flint had her hands full in trying to

keep Duff and Kendrick away from her, for they would persist in their attentions.

Mr. and Mrs. Woodland did their best to entertain the old guide, and did no doubt keep his indignation from boiling over.

Another group was made up of Miss DeVere, Sniffin, and Priestly.

"This wild West is very grand," that young lady remarked in the course of their conversation, "but I have had quite enough of it. I shall be heartily glad when I get home again. Oh dear me! I wish I were back at college, enjoying those happy days again. I am homesick whenever I recall them. With dear Richter—Richter the great, the unique, the only, you know—I can say:

"Blissful, blissful time! thou hast long since gone by."

"You knew Richter, of course, Mr. Sniffin," observed Priestly, turning to the commercial traveler, finding it impossible to let the opportunity go by.

"I have read him a little," was the answer, in a very dignified tone. "I suppose you never have."

"No, I am sorry to say that I never dabbled into the higher branches. Let me see, Richter was one of the Greek—"

"Oh! Mr. Priestly! how can you!" cried Miss DeVere, putting up her hands as though shocked almost beyond endurance; "surely you know that Richter was one of the lights of the period in which he flourished—1763 to 1825, you know. I am sure Mr. Sniffin could have told you that."

"I haven't the slightest doubts about that," declared Priestly, "and I was about to ask him."

"If you could be with Miss DeVere for a few weeks," said Sniffin, "you would know a great deal more than you do now."

"That is certainly true," responded Priestly; "and if you could enjoy her society for a few years, it would no doubt freshen your memory in regard to all the higher knowledge that has slipped away from you."

For this time, Priestly had the better of their parry.

In the course of their conversation the groups shifted a little, and the old ranger and his dog were left to themselves.

The old man was getting uneasy. He did detest all this "squaw palaver," and he wanted to get Kingsley aside to hold a little private consultation with him. He stood it as long as he could, and then, in a tone loud enough to be heard by all, he began to talk to his dog.

"What is th' matter with ye, Napoleon?" he inquired. "Ye seem ter look sort o' down-in-th'-mouth like. Are ye feelin' weary? Would ye like ter have a riddle or two ter rattle with, fer sort o' liven ye up? Le'me see, kin I think o' any? Yes, try this one: What comes after cheese? Don't say bread, now, fer that ain't it at all."

The dog wagged its tail, but was too lazy or too tired to get up, unless it saw that its master really wanted to play a little, when it would take part if required.

"Ye give it up, do ye?" the old man went on; "then I'll have ter tell ye. Th' thing that comes after cheese is mice. Ha, ha, ha!"

The dog barked, and the others of the party, seeing what was going on, drew near to listen.

This was evidently what the old man was playing for, for he smiled a little, and there was a merry twinkle in his honest gray eyes.

CHAPTER XVII.

DISPOSING OF TERRILL.

OLD RIDDLES patted the dog on the head, taking no notice of the fact that the others were collecting around him.

"Why didn't ye guess it, old feller?" he demanded. "That was an easy one. I thought I wouldn't hit ye very hard, seein' that ye are tired. Would ye like ter try another one? Wal, try this one: In what month o' th' year do ladies talk th' least? Ha, ha, ha! I guess I have got ye this time fer sure."

The dog became a little more playful as its master's humor increased, but of course it knew nothing about riddles.

"You really do not think your dog understands what you say, do you?" asked Miss Drayton.

Old Riddles looked up.

"In course he do, miss, in course he do! Why, they is meat an' drink to him, almost. You'd order see him sometimes when I git right down ter business with him. He goes almost crazy."

"But he never answers them, of course," remarked Miss DeVere.

"That ain't his fault, miss. If he could talk he would answer th' most o' 'em, that I'll bet on. But, come, Napoleon, what d'ye think o' that one?"

The dog barked and frisked around a little, seeing that its master was bound that it should play whether it felt like it or not.

We explain the dog's actions from its own view of the matter.

"D'ye see that? the old ranger called attention; 'I'll bet he knows th' answer ter that one,

an' is only sorry he can't spit it out. Mebbly some o' you more favored critters kin answer it fer him."

"I am sure I cannot," declared Miss Drayton, immediately. "I never was good for anything at guessing."

"Nor can I," avowed Miss DeVere. "In what month of the year do ladies talk the least? I cannot see anything in such a question. I do not see why they should talk any more in one month than in another."

"They do, all th' same," averred the old man, "or else my book isn't ter be relied on."

"In what month do ladies talk the least?" inquired Mrs. Woodland.

"Wal, ladies," responded the old guide, "I will tell ye. Th' month o' th' year in which ladies talk th' least, is February, because it is th' shortest. Ha, ha, ha! I reckon ye can't git around that."

All the men of the party laughed heartily.

"Now I think you had better march," advised Olivia. "You are altogether too smart."

"Yes, march you may, august sir," Blanche piled on.

Old Riddles looked dazed.

"Can't ye hit it ag'in?" he inquired. "If ye kin spring summer about a dozen more autumn kind, you'll winter prize."

The men howled with laughter. It is impossible to set forth in cold type the exact way the above was said, but the idea is clear. "If you can spring somewhere about a dozen more of them kind, you will win the prize." The old man's own grammar and his peculiar pronunciation and drawl made the four-fold pun almost perfect.

"You need not try to get the better of Old Riddles in his own line," observed Kingsley.

"He certainly is quite seasonable with his retort," hazarded Mrs. Woodland.

"I ain't much good on puns," declared the old man, modestly. "Riddles is my best holt."

"I enjoy riddles, too," announced Miss Flint.

"You do?" the old ranger exclaimed, wheeling sharply around; "I am glad ter hear it. You seem ter have— [he was about to say "hoss sense"]—ter have solid an' sound idees, you do."

"Thank you, sir. But give us some more of your store of riddles. They are good to pass away the time."

"That is jest what Napoleon thinks, too. He could listen to 'em all day, if I could tell 'em all day. Ain't that so, Napoleon? By th' way, what cause would th' dog have fer alarm an' affront if I should mistake him fer a b'ar?"

"Give it up."

"Oh, yes, we give it up."

Such were the cries, followed instantly by the demand:

"What is the answer?"

"Why," the old mountaineer explained, "he would know that I would make game of him on sight."

This was voted a pretty good one, and there was a general cry for more.

"Well," the old man agreed. "I can give them to you as long as you can stand 'em. Why is corn and pertater like Hindoo idols?"

As he asked this he moved a little away from the ladies, as though he did not care to have them too close to him, placing himself more among the men.

"That is a hard one, I am sure," remarked Miss Flint.

"Here is a chance for you to show what you know, Mr. Sniffin," observed that gentleman's tormentor, Priestly.

"I do not lay claim to any knowledge in that line," was the reply. "No doubt you can win honors at it if you try."

"No, they are too deep for me."

This was cut short by the demand made upon Old Riddles for the answer to the riddle just given.

"Sorry ter see ye give 'em all up," the old man remarked, "but sence ye do I s'pose I'll have ter tell ye. The reason why corn an' pertaters is like Hindoo idols, is because they have ears that can't hear an' eyes that can't see. An' now here is another: Why is a healthy boy like th' United States?"

"Why is a healthy boy like the United States?"

"Jest so."

"Because he can fight?" ventured Miss DeVere.

"That is good on th' States' side," declared the old man, "but it don't fit th' boy so well, sence all healthy boys can't fight. D'ye give it up?"

"Yes," was the reply all around, "we give it up."

"Well, a healthy boy is like th' United States because he has a good constitution. An' now here is still another: If you had an uncle, an' that uncle had a brother, what relation would that brother be to you if he wasn't yer uncle?"

"I think I can answer that one," announced Miss Flint.

"Good! I thought some one o' ye would grip onter that. What is yer answer?"

"Why," Miss Flint explained, "if my uncle had a brother who was not my uncle, he must be my father."

"Right! What d'ye think o' that, Napoleon? You'll have ter look out now, or you will be

gettin' left. D'ye want ter hear any more, ladies?"

"Yes, to be sure," was the cry.

"Well, here is one more, 'an' then I shall have ter go an' see what kin be done in th' way o' providin' somethin' ter eat. Which is th' oldest tree?"

"Why, that is rather a strange one," remarked Olivia; "where do you mean?"

"It means anywhere; take in th' whole world if ye want ter. It is a plain question, I'm sure."

"Well, I hardly know how to get around that," said Olivia, thoughtfully. "I believe there is a very old tree tree in— Really I have forgotten where. I give it up."

"Is it the oak?" ventured Blanche.

"No, it ain't th' oak. D'ye give it up?"

"Yes," from all, as usual.

"Wal, th' oldest tree is th' elder, of course. An' now kin ye tell me why th' elder tree isn't thought well of?"

"Oh, goodness, no?" exclaimed Olivia; "why is it?"

"Because it isn't poplar."

"Dear me," sighed Miss Flint, "is there any end to your stock of riddles, Mr. Horn?"

"Wal, I know a sight of 'em," was the answer, "but I'll have ter cut short on 'em fer this time. We have got ter think about somethin' ter eat afore long."

As he spoke, the old ranger picked up his rifle and swung it upon his shoulder, adding:

"Boss Kingsley, I'd like ter see you fer a little game o' private chin, if you kin oblige me."

"Certainly, old friend," Kingsley answered, and excusing himself to the ladies, he joined the guide and went with him out of the camp.

"Ye see," Old Riddles remarked, "I was gettin' weary o' all that squaw palaver, so I thought I would put an end to it in a way that wouldn't give no offense to nobody. I wanted ter talk with ye. Th' more I think of th' fix that we are in, Kingsley, th' less I like it, a good deal. It is a tanel bad fix, an' no mistake. If we was all he critters, an' I wish ter goodness we wur, we—"

"I can't agree with you in that wish," Kingsley observed, as his mind rested upon Blanche Drayton.

"No, I should reckon not," the old man commented; "but what I was goin' ter say, if we was all he critters we could fight our way out, if it kem ter that. As it is, we have got ter lay still an' keep out o' danger. Every one of us counts one. An' one of th' things that I want ter sound ye on is th' question o' feedin' on hoss meat fer a time. D'ye think yer stummick will stand it?"

Kingsley laughed.

"It will stand horse meat better than no meat at all, I think, old man," he replied. "There is no question of what we can do; we shall have to do it."

"Jest so. An' then comes that question of th' traitor in our camp. Th' more I think about him th' madder I git. I would like ter git hold of him an' wring his tanel neck fer him. What are we ter do with him?"

"That is for you to say."

"Well, I have been thinkin' that it will be poor policy after all fer us ter take him priz'ner, fer we will have extra work ter take keer of him. S'pose I let him go out fer game, as he wants ter do, an' let him go to th' outlaw camp an' do his worst. He can't do us a great deal o' harm, I don't reckon, an' it will be only one more fer us ter fight against."

"Probably that will be about as good a thing as we can do with him. It does not seem quite right, though, to let him get away so easily after what he has done. I suppose he will have cheek enough to come back again, after he has reported to that outlaw chief."

"Well, let him; that will give us a good chance ter git hold o' him later on. As it is now, we've got no time ter take keer o' him."

"Then it is agreed to let him go, eh?"

"Yes, we'll let him go."

This agreed upon, they returned to the cabin.

Terrill was in a sullen mood, after the words he had had with the old ranger, but when he learned that it had been decided to let him go out for game, if any was to be found, he came around all right and agreed to go. It was just what he wanted to do. He had nothing to look out for but a rifle, everything else being already in the outlaw camp; and in a few minutes he set out.

CHAPTER XVIII.

UNLOOKED-FOR REVELATIONS.

IT must not be imagined that the main idea of our story has been lost sight of—by no means. The hidden treasure, the rock of the cross, the mysterious personage who has been warning our friends of their danger, all are still in mind, as they were still in the minds of Philip Kingsley, Old Riddles, and the other two of their party.

Search for the hidden treasure was not to be thought of now, however, for there were other and more immediately important matters to be attended to. Another party had suddenly come upon them, asking aid and protection, and these things had to be granted, since half the persons

of that party were ladies. There was very little to eat, and that was the first thing of immediate necessity.

The old ranger was in no enviable position. Here he had upon his hands a number of persons who were almost as helpless as babes. About the only ones who were really to be relied on were himself, Kingsley, Priestly, Woodland and Kendrick. Here were only five, with what little assistance could be rendered by the other men and the women of the party, in case of urgent necessity, to defend the camp.

It will be seen that the courage of Duff and Sniffin was not rated very high.

Old Riddles led one of the horses out of the camp, having advised the others what he intended to do, and in a little while the report of his rifle was heard. This was the signal that their next repast would be one of rather an equal order.

While this work was being done Philip Kingsley and Blanche Drayton strolled out to the little stream behind the cabin, and there seated themselves upon an inviting rock.

On the right, a little distance away, the stream poured down from the rocky heights above, making merry music in its fall, and on the left it disappeared under the solid base of the mountain. Hence, as has been said before, the cabin was safe from attack on that side.

"I suppose you are sorry that you started out to see the West, are you not? seeing the dangers you have fallen into," observed Kingsley.

"Well, I hardly know," was the reply. "I am sorry, of course, that my friends have had such bad luck, but so long as we get out of our present trouble all right I do not think we can complain. It will be something to relate in the way of personal adventure."

"Yes, that is true; I sincerely hope that we shall be able to protect you from any further molestation."

"I do not feel at all alarmed now. I am sure we shall get away all in good time, and get safely back to civilization."

"Did I understand you to say that you are from Indiana?" Kingsley inquired.

"Yes, that is my native State," was the reply.

"Are the Woodlands from there, too?"

"No, sir; they are from Virginia. You see I made Miss De Vere's acquaintance at school, where we happened to be room-mates, and so came to know Mr. and Mrs. Woodland. They are very nice persons."

"Yes, I agree with you on that. Miss De Vere is a little gone on the subject of German literature, but otherwise she seems to be a very agreeable young lady."

"Oh yes, she is good and kind-hearted, and that is about her only fault. I know she likes to let us see that she has studied, but that is her nature, I suppose."

"I think you said you had not seen her in some time until you met her at Denver, did you not?"

"That is right. I had come to Denver some weeks previously, partly on business and partly on pleasure."

"Then you had no intention of extending your travels beyond that point until you fell in with your friend, eh?"

"No intention whatever. I tried to refuse their kind offer, too, but they would not hear to it. I suppose you and your friends are out here purely for pleasure, are you not?"

"Far from it," Kingsley answered. "We are here purely on business. At the same time, however, we are taking all the enjoyment we can."

"Which will not be much, now that you are burdened with us, I fear."

"You greatly mistake," returned Kingsley. "I feel that the pleasure of my sojourn in the Western wilds is just beginning. The enjoyment of the present hour is the most pleasurable I have known in a long time."

Blanche laughed.

"Then I must say that you are remarkably easily pleased," she said.

"On the contrary, I am hard to please. I assure you—"

"Pray let us change the subject. I suppose that you, like us, are on your way to some settlement, are you not? I hope we shall not retard you in your journey, nor take you out of your course."

"Have we not told you that we were camping here?"

"If so, it has slipped from my mind. I suppose by that, however, you mean that you are stopping here for a few days, and intended to go on soon."

"No, we are for the present making this old cabin our home. We may stay here for many weeks."

"Indeed! But, surely, the business you spoke of as the cause of your being here is not connected with this wild locality, is it?"

"It is."

Miss Drayton looked at him for a moment in surprise.

"Oh, I see," she presently spoke; "you are mining. How stupid of me. Ah! I guess Mr. Horn has killed the horse, if that was his rifle. Do you think you shall be able to eat horse meat?"

"We shall find that better than no meat, as I told Old Riddles," was the reply.

Miss Drayton, finding that she was unintentionally becoming far too inquisitive, had, by the timely report of the rifle, been enabled to turn to another subject.

"Yes, I suppose we certainly shall. By the way, if I can ever get near enough to Mr. Horn to converse with him, I must endeavor to get a little information out of him. He may be able to assist me in the matter of business that brought me to the West. Do you think you could help me out in my difficulty? Mr. Horn is so shy that I have little hopes of ever getting hold of him. He is an old man, and I understand that he has been in this wild country for many years."

"I have no desire to invite your confidence," Kingsley responded, "but if I can make any inquiries for you I shall be happy to do so."

"I think I will tell you my story, for it will do me no good to keep it to myself, if I expect to get the information I am seeking."

"As you please. I shall feel honored, and promise you every aid that I can render."

"I believe you, sir; and now while we have a few minutes in private I will tell you. I did think of employing a detective, but I found that my means would not allow it, so I had to do the work myself in my own blundering way."

"Have you had any success?"

"None whatever. Years ago, when I was a little child, my father started for the West to look for a hidden treasure, and— Why, Mr. Kingsley, what is the matter?"

At the mention of hidden treasure, Kingsley gave a start and his face turned pale. Like a flash a suspicion dawned upon his mind.

"Your father's quest was so like my own," he confessed, "that I could not help the start you saw me make."

It was Blanche's turn to show excitement.

"Can it be possible that there is any connection between my father's search and your own?" she hastily questioned.

"It is not at all unlikely," Kingsley assured.

"But, go on with your story, and when you have told me that, I will tell you mine. You will find that it is more like a romance than a recital of real fact."

"I am now anxious enough to hear it, you may be sure, so I will make my own as brief as possible. My mother died when I was about ten years of age, leaving me to the care of Miss Flint. Before that I had heard the story of my father's going away in search of the treasure I spoke of, and I could barely remember him. At her death my mother desired me to try, some time, to learn something of his fate. I promised, but took no action in the matter until last year, when it was again brought to my mind by my dear companion. It seems my mother had exacted a promise of her, too, that she would remind me of my obligation as soon as she thought I was old enough to undertake the work. She had kept putting it off, but finally could put it off no longer, so brought it back to my mind and we set out. From Miss Flint I learned more of the particulars than I had learned from my mother. It appears that one cold winter night there came a rap at the door of our house, and on going to open it, father found there a man who was not only ill, but nearly frozen to death as well. The man was taken in, and everything was done for him that could be done, but he insisted that there was no help for him and that he was dying. My father wanted to set out for a doctor, but the man would not allow him to do so, insisting that it would be of no use whatever, and telling him that he had something to say that was of far more importance than doctor's aid."

"Your story is deeply interesting," declared Kingsley; "pray hasten on."

"It is interesting because I am telling it more fully than I told it to any one at Denver," was the answer. "There I simply made inquiries for one Horace Drayton, only giving the time when he was supposed to have been at Denver, and the information that I thought would aid in finding some one who had met with him. I did not dare to speak of a hidden treasure there."

"A wise plan, but I fear your search for news of your father was hopeless."

"No doubt it was; but let me get on with the story. The dying man placed a parchment map into my father's hand, the map itself being wrapped in other sheets of parchment, and the whole inclosed in a copper envelope."

"Wonder of wonders," cried Kingsley; "it is the same!"

"What are you talking about?"

Miss Drayton was now trembling with excitement.

"Never mind now," Kingsley hastened; "go on. I will tell you all as soon as you are done."

"Well, that man confessed to having been a great robber. He was educated, but was a bad man. The map, he said, would lead to the place where he had buried a vast treasure. He had been a priest in South America, but had turned brigand, and the bulk of the hidden treasure was gold and silver that he had stolen from churches in South America and Mexico. It was his intention to make his way to his native country—Spain, I think—and there make up a

trusted band and return to get the treasure, since he could not get it away alone. On the night previous to his coming to our house, however, he had slept in a barn, and there had had a wonderful dream. He dreamed that an angel appeared to him, told him that his end was near, and warning him to confess his guilt. This dream was only the working of his guilty conscience, of course, but it had such an effect upon him that he declared he had prayed for hours to be enabled to reach some human habitation where he could make his confession and die in peace."

Here Miss Drayton was interrupted by the approach of Deborah Flint.

CHAPTER XIX.

BLANCHE DRAYTON'S RESOLVE.

ONE glance at Miss Flint's face was sufficient to show that something had happened to disturb the usual serenity of her nature. She was flushed and indignant.

"What in the world has happened, Debby?" asked Blanche.

"I have been insulted, that is what has happened," was the angry reply. "I was never so insulted in my life."

"Who has insulted you?" asked Kingsley, his indignation rising.

"It was that rascally villain of a Duff," the elderly maiden explained.

"Can it be possible?" questioned Blanche, in doubting tones.

"It is not only possible, but it is true," insisted Deborah. "I never was so insulted in all my life. What do you suppose he has said to me?"

"That is hard to guess," returned Blanche; "shall I walk back to the cabin with you?"

"No, for I will not return there while he remains."

"I will go and demand an explanation and apology from him at once," said Kingsley, rising.

"I can give you the explanation part of it," cried the irate maiden, "and I will. You know that I am slightly troubled with lameness, owing to rheumatism."

"Yes," acknowledged Blanche.

"Well, he had the impudence to ask me if I am afflicted with corns; and before I could recover from the shock sufficiently to answer him in the manner he deserved, went right on to invite me remove my shoe and let him apply some of his Patent Dynamic Root-and-Branch Corn Exterminator."

Blanche laughed heartily, and it was all that Kingsley could do to keep from doing the same.

"Oh, you can laugh," cried Deborah, "but it is no laughing matter. I never had a corn in my life, and to think that I should come up to my present years to be so grossly insulted. It is too much."

"I think Mr. Duff has meant no harm," observed Kingsley. "He is a professional corn-doctor, you know."

"Professional or not, he had no business to suppose that I have corns when I never had one in my life. When I am in need of a doctor, I go to one; I don't want one to come hunting around after me."

"I have no doubt he thought he was doing you an act of kindness," said Blanche. "I am sure he had no idea of insulting you, Debby."

"Well, that may be so, but he wants to understand that he must never take any such liberty with me again. The very idea! asking me if I have corns, and then going so far as to want me to take off my shoe and let him apply salve to my toes! I was shocked beyond anything I ever experienced in my life."

"Oh, well, I would think no more about it, since it is pretty certain that he meant well enough," Blanche pacified. "Mr. Kingsley and I are talking upon a matter of the greatest importance to you and me, and if you will join us, I promise you that you will be interested in it as deeply as I am."

"Well, I will let it pass for this time, but if he ever mentions such a thing to me again, it will not be well for him, that I promise. What is the subject you find so interesting?"

"We are talking about the business that brought you and me to the West."

"Indeed."

"Yes; and I have just been telling Mr. Kingsley the story of my father's coming out here so long ago in search of treasure, and his never returning."

"Have you told him all?"

"Yes, or very nearly all."

"If you will go on and finish your story," said Kingsley, "I will then tell you my own. I am sure I shall interest you."

"There is little more to tell, sir," responded Blanche. "The man died soon after telling his story, and my father saw to it that he was decently buried. For some time father took no action in the matter, but it was in his thoughts all the while, and at last he resolved to set out in search of the treasure. He did so, and we never saw him again, nor ever learned what his fate was. Mother did not live many years longer, when she was obliged to give up hope, but died when I was about ten. That is about all there is to tell."

"Did your mother ever hear from your father, after he set out?" Kingsley inquired.

"Oh, yes, sir, she heard from him many times," explained Miss Flint, now as thoroughly interested in the matter as the others; "and every letter was full of hope and promises to return as soon as possible. At last, however, his letters stopped altogether, and he was never heard from again."

"Where was the last letter from, that was received from him?"

"It was from Denver."

"Can you tell me about when it was dated?"

"Yes; it was dated June 15th, 1866."

"How long was that after he had left home?"

"About four months."

"Had he begun his search at that time?"

"Yes, he had made one trip into the mountains, and was then about starting upon another."

"Did he say in what direction he was going?"

"Yes, sir; he said he was going south."

"Was he going alone?"

"Yes, we think that was his intention."

"And that was the last that was ever heard of him?"

"Yes, that was the very last."

"Well, now I think my story will come in splendidly to fill out yours."

"What do you mean?" inquired Deborah, who was not aware of what Kingsley had been saying to Blanche.

"I mean that I am here looking for the same treasure that Horace Drayton set out to find so many years ago."

"Impossible!"

"Not impossible at all, but the very truth."

At this revelation, Miss Flint became as excited as Blanche had been.

"I do not understand how that can be," she said, wonderingly. "Surely, you never knew Horace Drayton?"

"We cannot expect to understand it until we have heard Mr. Kingsley's story," observed Blanche.

"Which I will hasten to tell you," said he. "Eugene Priestly and I are cousins. Not long ago our only relative, an uncle, died, leaving his property to us. We came West to have the estate settled. Among his effects was a tin box, sealed, to be delivered to the elder of us, which happened to be me. In that box were two letters, and a document which was inclosed in a copper envelope."

"Mercy sakes!" exclaimed Miss Flint. "How strange!"

"The very paper that brought my father to this wild land!" Blanche gasped.

"It certainly was," Kingsley affirmed; "there is no doubt about it. But we can easily prove that."

As he spoke, Kingsley drew a small package from an inner pocket, opened it, and drew out the wonderful copper envelope.

"It is the very same!" Deborah exclaimed, the instant she saw it.

"Was there any writing on it when you saw it last?" Kingsley asked.

"No, sir, there was not."

"You are sure of that?"

"Of course I am; I had the envelope in my hands many times."

"Well, there is writing on it now, but it is so nearly obliterated that I have been unable to make it out. See if you can guess what it is, Miss Drayton."

Blanche took the envelope and looked at it carefully.

"I know what it has read," she presently declared.

"You do?"

"Yes; it is very clear to me."

"Which part do you refer to?"

"To all of it."

"Good! I was able to guess what the first part of it was, but having no clew to the rest of it, it was impossible for me to make anything out of it. What has it read?"

"It would be impossible for any one to read it without some foreknowledge of what it should be, judging by the letters that remain. I make it to read thus:

"MRS. CLARA DRAYTON,

OR,

DEBORAH FLINT,

Templeton,

Indiana."

"That is certainly it," declared Kingsley, "for the missing letters fit almost exactly. This, taken all together, makes a wondrous revelation for us."

[The reader can refer to the envelope by turning back to the third chapter.]

"It does, indeed!" agreed Blanche and Deborah together.

Kingsley then read aloud the letters, and ere he had done, the two women were in tears.

"It was a sad fate for him to meet, when success was within his grasp," the young man remarked, when he had done.

"Poor father," meditated Blanche, "it was sad indeed."

"Have you any success in your search?" inquired Deborah.

"None whatever, thus far," was the reply, "but I am not going to give up until I am obliged to. What do you intend to do now, Miss Drayton?"

"With your permission we, Debby and I, will remain with your party until you either solve the mystery or give up the search. Will you allow us to do so? I can go no further with my friends now, since Providence has so kindly led me so near to the secret of which I am in search."

"It gives me the greatest pleasure to say that you are welcome to stay if you desire to do so, but do you not think that you had better go to some town, as soon as we can get out of our present difficulty, and there remain until I have finished the work?"

"No, I would rather remain here, if it is possible. I want to share in the search."

"Well, it shall be as you say. I will consult with Old Riddles about it, and I think it can be arranged. We shall have to conduct your friends to some place of safety before we go on with the work, however, and that shall be done as soon as we can get out of the hands of these outlaws that are around us."

"I have an idea that they will want to remain too, when they learn what a big mystery we are trying to clear up."

"You shall tell them about it, then?"

"Oh, yes; for they would demand some good excuse for my wanting to stay, you know."

"Well, I hope they will stay, for that will save us a great deal of time. For the present they have got to stay, whether they want to or not."

CHAPTER XX.

A GHASTLY FIND.

LET us now turn our attention to Walden Terrill, and follow him to the outlaw camp.

As soon as he was out of sight, after the old ranger had allowed him to take his leave, he laughed to himself.

"How nicely I have fooled them all," he chuckled. "I was a little afraid that the old man did suspect me of shooting Burke, but I guess he did not. I shut his eye up nicely when I took his dog to the wrong place. I guess he thought his dog was not very sharp on the scent this morning."

The rascal had the wrong view of it.

"I would like to know what Burke Grinder told them, if they got anything out of him at all. It is pretty certain that he did not have time to tell all he knew, or they would have gone for me in the worst kind of way. Oh, no, they did not suspect me, that is pretty certain."

So he mused as he hurried along.

He made all the haste he could, and the idea of looking for game was entirely out of his mind. He had no intention of doing anything of the kind when he started. He was aiming for the outlaw camp, and that as straight as possible.

Suddenly he came to a halt.

"This will not do," he meditated, "I am going it too blindly. If that old man takes a notion to follow me with the dog, he will learn just where I have gone to, and that will knock in the head the idea of my coming back, again if I should desire to do so. I must hide my trail somehow."

He began to reflect upon the way and means.

Presently an idea came to him and he changed his course. He clambered up the rocky wall of the valley with all the speed he could, for he wanted to lose as little time as possible and made his way then to the south and west above the place where the cabin was situated.

In due time he came to the stream that made its way down behind the cabin, coming out upon it at a point above the waterfall that has been mentioned.

"Here I can puzzle them a little, I guess," he reasoned, and stepping into the water he walked up-stream in the bed where it rushed along.

He continued in this course for fully a quarter of a mile, when he came out upon another waterfall that forbade further progress.

Near at hand was the limb of a tree, and taking hold of that the man pulled himself up out of the water and on up into the tree, from where he descended on the opposite side and continued on his way.

"There," he mused, "if the old man can follow that trail he is much smarter than I take him to be. Now for the camp. I am turned around a little, but I guess I can lay my course so as to get there sometime to-day."

He hurried along as fast as the nature of the ground would permit, heading toward the direction of the outlaw camp.

His manner of proceeding proved that he was not altogether a stranger to the mountains, but there was an air of uncertainty about him, too, that showed this to be a new trail to him.

In truth, there was no trail there, so he had to make his way as best he could, going by guess as much as anything.

He had gone perhaps a mile in this way, when he came to a sudden stop, and in a way that went to show that he had seen some not altogether agreeable sight.

What was it?

There, before him lay a human skeleton.

There was nothing in that of itself that need startle him, that is, beyond a natural feeling of awe that cannot be helped; but it was the manner in which it lay, more than anything else, that for an instant seemed to chill his heart.

The skeleton was lying on its side. One arm was outstretched, the hand lying upon a flat stone. The other hand pointed toward the stone, the index finger aiming as straight as it could have aimed had it been a finger that throbbed with life.

For a few moments the man stood and gazed at it in silence.

"There is something funny about that rattle-box of bones," he presently mused. "One would think that it was pointing to that rock with a purpose in view. Can it be possible that such is the case?"

He stood still and looked at it for some little time.

"It is only my imagination, I suppose," he mused, "but I cannot help thinking that it is pointing to that stone with a purpose. It will not take me long to find out, and here goes to do it."

Stepping forward, he moved the bones away carelessly with his foot, and that done, picked up the stone upon which one hand of the skeleton had rested.

Under that stone was found another and smaller one, and upon that, folded up, lay the remains of a piece of a felt hat.

"There is something here, that is sure," the man thought, and without any further delay he took up the piece of felt and opened it.

In it was found a piece of parchment, carefully folded.

The larger stone lying over the smaller one had kept the weather from baring the felt or the parchment it contained, and it was in almost as good condition as when it had been placed there.

With trembling hands the man unfolded it and read what it contained.

It read as follows:

"a quarter of the treasure is yours—your well-earned reward. No more need I say. To guard against the possibility of the direction stamped upon the copper envelope becoming unreadable before it is found, I will repeat it here. It is—Mrs. Clara Drayton, or Deborah Ann Flint, Templeton, Indiana."

"HORACE DRAYTON."

"NOTE—I forgot to inclose— Please forward as above— Send map to my wife— I am dying."

The last words were written in a very scrawling hand, and some very blunt instrument had been used. As for the ink, it had every appearance of blood.

There was another sheet of the parchment, and on that was a map.

To the reader the story of this skeleton is plainly told. It was all that remained of Horace Drayton. He had failed to inclose all he should have inclosed in the copper envelope, and being unable to crawl out to the trail again, had added these few words to his letter with his life blood, and then had placed the parchment under the stone with perhaps the last breath of life leaving his body.

By referring to the unfinished letter in chapter three, it will be seen at a glance that this was the continuance of it.

Walden Terrill stood and gazed at the paper in amazement. There was something about the names it mentioned that sounded very familiar to him, but where— Ha! he had it now. Were these not the names of two of the persons at the old cabin? It was certainly so. There was one Deborah Flint, and also one Blanche Drayton. Could it be possible that this was the Deborah Flint that was mentioned in this mysteriously-found letter? He had not heard that she had a middle name—Ann, but that did not by any means prove that she had none. Yes, there must be some wonderful connecting circumstances, and it was a case that promised ripe for investigation.

He read the fragment of letter over and over again.

"There is more in this than appears on the surface," he debated. "Here is mention of a treasure. What treasure is it, and where is it hidden? This map must be one to show where its hiding-place is. The Night Hawks are in luck this time, and no mistake. The treasure must be a considerable one, since a quarter of it is named as a reward for some person for some work or other that has no doubt been mentioned in another part of the letter. Hang the luck! why could I not have found the whole thing while I was about it? Dast your grinning impudence," he cried, giving the skull of the skeleton a kick, "why didn't you leave it all here?"

Folding up the letter, he next gave attention to the map.

This map has been mentioned frequently enough to need no further description. It was indeed the map intended to lead to the finding of the treasure, but as has been seen in the letter left by the uncle of Philip Kingsley and Eugene Priestly, it was not at all accurate. Whether this was a mistake on the part of the man who made it, or whether it had been made so on purpose, we are not prepared to say. Be that as it may, it was a very fortunate mistake

for the persons who were entitled to the treasure, and at the same time a very unfortunate one for the rascal into whose hands it had now fallen. It would give the outlaws many weeks of hard work to go over the same ground that Horace Drayton had gone over, only to find in the end that the map was not accurate.

The more the rascal thought of it, the more fevered he became in his desire to find the treasure, and he was tempted to desert the outlaw band and go it alone on his own account. This plan, however, had its drawbacks, and he foresaw that it would be likely to end in failure, and in that event he would be out all around.

Right on the heels of that idea came another thought, and that was, to return to the cabin, make some inquiries of Miss Drayton concerning who she was, and so forth, and if she proved to be an heir of the dead man's, then to try to win her hand in marriage by disclosing what he had found.

But this plan had even more serious objections than the other. The outlaw chief would soon be calling him to account, and Terrill well knew his power. It would end in his being murdered, and then he would gain nothing, while the outlaw would gain all. Clearly there was no inducement in that.

No, he at last decided, he would lay the case before his chief, and, being as they were on nearly an equal footing in the band, it would be share and share alike between them, using their men as their tools in carrying out the work of finding the hiding-place.

It must be seen that complications were rapidly crowding to the front. It would soon not only be a feud between the outlaws and our friends, but a desperate rivalry between them for the finding of the treasure. At the present time, however, the outlaw had no knowledge that Kingsley or any of the party at the old cabin was in quest of it. Terrill considered himself the only possessor of the secret.

And, too, there were Priestly and Kendrick, who had made some discovery or other, and who were only anxious to play false to Kingsley and desert him. In the present state of affairs, however, they could not think of trusting themselves away from the others.

What would the outcome of it all be? No one could foresee that, so it remains for us to forge ahead and ascertain.

Terrill looked all around carefully before going on, in the hope of finding something more that would throw additional light upon the mystery, but failed to find anything that could do so.

In the place where the skeleton had lain were the fragments of the clothes the man had worn, and such articles as knife, revolver, etc., now all rusted almost beyond recognition.

Seeing that he could discover nothing more, the fellow left the spot and hastened on his way.

"Here is something new under the sun, anyhow," he thought. "Who could have guessed that I should stumble upon such a thing as this when I set out from the old cabin? What will it lead to, I wonder? What part is that pretty Blanche Drayton going to play in it? Can it be that she is the daughter of the man whose bones I have found? Stranger things than that have happened, I suppose, and there is nothing at all unlikely about it. I will hurry on and lay the matter before Captain Red-Hand."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE NIGHT HAWKS' CAMP.

IN about thirty minutes more Walden Terrill arrived at the outlaw camp.

Before he could enter, though, he had to answer the challenge of the sentinel, the camp being governed in a purely military manner.

That point passed, he went on in a free-and-easy way that proved that he was quite at home there.

He went straight to the tent of the captain of the band.

"Hello, Terrill," he was greeted, "where have you been keeping yourself? I have been looking for you."

Terrill advanced and shook hands with the outlaw chief, and replied:

"I intended to come sooner, but when our guide took one of your men prisoner, yesterday, I thought I would hold on a little and see if I could not set him at liberty for you. I could not do so, however, without running the risk of betraying myself, so I had to let him stay there."

"And he is there yet?"

"Yes, he is there yet, and likely to stay there, too."

"What do you mean?"

"He is dead and buried."

The chief swore in a most startling manner.

"Did they hang him?" he demanded.

"No," was the cool reply; "I shot him."

"You shot him? What did you do that for?"

"Because I thought that was about the best thing to be done under the circumstances."

"What in blazes were the circumstances?"

"Why, they had him at the stake, with a fire all around him, to force him to talk. No man could stand that, you know, and he did talk. I

was out on the hills, and when I came in sight of the camp I saw that he was talking; and knowing that he was likely to spit out all he knew, I up with my rifle and let drive at him."

"Killed him outright, eh?"

"He never kicked once."

"Well, I guess you did all right enough, but we can't afford to lose our men in that way. It will be well for you not to let any of his pards find you out in this, for it might go hard with you if they do."

"They will not find it out, if they wait for me to tell them, and I guess you are not likely to expose it."

"Not at all. Well, what do you know?"

"I know that Old Riddles got away with your men in bad shape last night. I had to have a hand in that, too, but it would have been just the same if I had not been there. I can tell you that old ranger is a terror, and we shall have our hands full to get away with him. He seems to have a charmed life."

"Why did you not put a bullet into him, too, while you were about it this morning?"

"I had to get out of sight too quick. There was no chance for it, for I had to shoot and dodge. I did try to see him coming up the hill, after I had let him see me and called to him to come up, but he did not come the way I was looking for him."

"He is too old a bird to be caught with salt, and, as you say, he is bound to give us trouble before we are done with him. Curse him, he crippled our camp by the haul he made out of us last night. My men crawled back into camp like so many whipped curs."

"You don't mean to give up, though, do you?"

"Not by a big sight. I will have those girls now, if it costs every man I have. I was a fool not to take them the other day when I had the chance. I don't see what I was thinking about. Let us once get hold of them, and we will break camp and strike out north again, and leave that old ranger and the rest of them to whistle."

"I don't think you will leave here for some time," Terrill observed.

"You don't; what in the dickens is the reason why? Am I not captain of the band?"

"You certainly are, and that is the very reason why you will stay here for a time."

"I fail to understand you."

"That is not to be wondered at. You will understand it all when I tell you, though. Before I go into that, however, there is another matter that I must put before you. Do you know there is a traitor in your camp?"

"A traitor in my camp! Who is he? The dog shall hang within ten minutes."

"I do not know who he is, but I know there is some one here in the hills that is working against you, and who seems to know your business pretty well."

"Well, go on and explain yourself."

The outlaw was now pacing the floor.

"It is soon told. Last night there was a light appeared on the side of the mountain above the cabin, waving as though it was intended for a signal. We took it to be such, and answered it. Down came a ball of fire, then, and attached to it was a written note, warning the party of the fact that Captain Red-hand and his band of Night Hawks were after them, and advising them to get out of the hills. Then during the night there was a notice posted on the door of the cabin, telling them they had better not try to get out of the valley just then, warning them that they would only fall into the hands of the outlaws if they tried it, and stating that they should be advised when it would be safe to start."

Captain Red-hand's rage scarcely knew bounds. He paced the floor like an enraged lion, cursing roundly at everything.

"Have you any idea who it can be?" Terrill presently ventured to ask.

"No, not the slightest idea," was the angry reply. "I would like to know, and you can safely bet that I would make it warm for him. It is strange that he does not make himself known to the people at the cabin, if he is so friendly to them."

"That is what I thought. He—or she—must have some reason for not doing so. I forgot to mention that the writing has the appearance of a woman's hand."

"The deuce it does."

"Yes; why, does that give you any clearer idea as to who it may be?"

"No, it is a mystery, and one that I cannot see through. I will take pains to know who is in the camp and who is not, hereafter. If there is a traitor here I want to know him. But, what about that other matter you were going to explain? Why do you say that I will not leave here for some time?"

"I have stumbled upon one of the richest secrets you ever heard of," Terrill hastened to explain, "and one that promises untold riches for us."

"Get out; you are dreaming."

"Nary a dream about this, old fellow; it is the real thing. There is a big treasure hid in these mountains somewhere, not over a thousand miles from here, and I have the map that shows where it is."

The captain stopped, and listened with interest.

"Do you mean that?" he demanded, "or are you trying to give me a ghost-story? I am in no humor for trifling."

"Neither am I, and I mean every word of it. Just lend me your ears while I unfold a little tale to you."

The outlaw chief gave his attention, and Terrill went ahead and told him all that has just been set forth in the previous chapter.

Captain Red-hand was deeply interested.

"This is a mystery of mysteries," he reflected, when his ally had finished.

"You are right it is," agreed Terrill; "and the strangest part of it all yet remains to be told."

"Let me hear the rest of it, then."

"Well, two of the women over there at the old cabin have names that lead me to think they are in some way connected with the man whose bones I found."

"The deuce you say."

"Exactly. One of the girls is named Blanche Drayton, and she has a companion with her, a woman about fifty years old, I should say, whose name is Deborah Flint."

"By the great King George, but you have stumbled upon a mystery, and no mistake about it. We shall have to look into it. You were about right in guessing that we would not leave here for some time when I had heard this story. It is a big thing, if we can only find the place, and there is really a treasure there."

"We have every reason to believe that there is. Now, captain, what is it to be? share and share alike? If you will not agree to this, by Jackson I'll tear this map into a thousand bits. What is it to be?"

"Hold on, don't tear the map; it is to be share and share alike, of course."

"All right, that is all I ask. I found the secret, but I came right to you and laid it out before you, and there is no reason why we should not work the thing a little on the quiet and rake in the whole pile for ourselves. There is no need to take the men into the thing at all, is there?"

"No, we will not let them know what is up. We can take turns at looking for the place we want to find, and when we have found it I can send the men off on some sort of wild-goose chase while we have time to clean out the bank."

"That was just my idea about it. Now, what is your plan in regard to the party over at the cabin? What are you going to do with them? I suppose you want to get hold of the women, and then drive the men out of the way, eh?"

"That is the plan exactly. We must give them something to remember, too. I want that old man Horn to know that he cannot step on my corns and get away without a good kicking. He shall be paid for his pretty trick of last night."

"Now another question: shall I go back to the cabin or not? I do not think I am suspected, but if by any chance I am, and Old Riddles has got me marked, it will not be exactly safe. Mind, I do not think this is so, but it may be so."

"I think you had better keep away from them, now that you can do nothing to help us by going back. Let them think you dead, or whatever they like."

"That is about my own idea of it at present. Still, by going back I could be on hand to help get away with the girls when you come for them."

"You could do but little good in that line. If they suspect you they would not give you any chance to do them any harm, and if not, they would have you in some place where you would stand a fair chance of getting a lead pill from one of our own men. You had better stay where you are."

"That is the best thing, I think. Are you going for them to night?"

"No, I guess not. They will make a start out of there before long, and then we can go for them in some place where they will have less chance to defend themselves. We want to get hold of the women, and then it does not matter how many of the men go down in the scrimmage. That off our hands, we will then look into this treasure mystery a little and see what will come of it."

"Do you know anything of their plans?"

"No, nothing further than that they mean to stay where they are for a time. They know well enough what a good place they are in, and are not foolish enough to leave it for a worse one. I was thinking of this while you were talking, and the idea came to me that we might draw them out by pretending to go away."

"That is the best yet. I will consider it."

CHAPTER XXII.

SECRETS MADE KNOWN.

LEAVING Terrill and the outlaw chief to finish their task, let us now return to the old cabin and see how our friends are making out.

As we near the cabin, coming up the valley in our imagination, the savory smell of roasting meat greets us.

Coming nearer we find that the old ranger is

preparing dinner, with the assistance of Kingsley and Miss Flint.

It was to be their first repast on horse-meat."

The carcass of the horse was not to be seen, for the old man knew better than to have that in sight, and it is a question whether any one could have told that the meat was not beef, and prime beef at that.

When the board was spread, just outside the cabin, the old ranger invited all to surround it, an invitation that was quickly accepted.

"Now," said the old man, "pitch right in an' fill cl'ar up. Fix yer mind on cow purty firm, an' ye will think this is th' best beef ye ever tasted of. That is what we will call it, anyhow, so go right into it with a will."

So all hands did. They were a little dainty about it at first taste, but the appetite soon overcame the imagination, and then they ate heartily enough.

"What did I tell ye?" the old ranger demanded, laughing. "Didn't I tell ye that ye would git used to it in no time, an' that ye would not know th' difference 'tween it an' cow-meat? That is jest th' way it is. We kin git used ter anything, I don't keer what it is."

"I guess you are about right, old man," agreed Kingsley. "By the way, you seem to be getting a little more used to the society of the gentler sex. How do you account for that? On the same principle?"

"Jest so," the old ranger replied. "I never did keer much fer wimmen; but it is jest like I said of the hoss-meat—we kin git used to anything."

"Then, when we have become used to it, it is not so bad after all," ventured Woodland.

"Some things might be worse, an' some a good deal better," was the old man's non-committing reply. "It is every one to his own likes. What is th' matter, Napoleon?" turning to his dog; "d'ye think that ye ain't comin' in fer a share o' this hoss? Wal, ye are, an' don't fergit it. Here, take this an' chaw on it," throwing a huge piece of meat to the faithful brute.

"Mr. Horn," asked Miss DeVere, "why do you call your dog Napoleon?"

"Why do I call my dog Napoleon? That is another riddle, I take it. I will tell ye, miss, sence ye ask. I have hed that same question put to me lots o' times, an' I have got th' answer to th' riddle all cocked an' primed an' ready fer action. Ye see, me an' Napoleon is more like brothers than we is like master an' dog. In my love fer that dog I consider him almost my equal, any day. If he was bone o' my bone an' flesh o' my flesh, I couldn't regard him no higher than I do. Sence he ain't all that, howsumever, I call him Napoleon because he is bone apart. D'ye see?"

Kingsley was the first to catch on, and he laughed heartily. The others were not slow to follow, with the one exception of Socrates Sniffin. He looked around in a dazed sort of way, wondering where the joke came in.

"Have you got an explanatory chart of that riddle to hand to Mr. Sniffin for a day or two, Mr. Horn," asked Priestly, glad to get a dig at the drummer; "he does not seem to get hold of it readily."

"That is th' way with some folks," the old man responded; "but in this case I guess it is more th' fault of th' riddle than it is o' th' man. I feel ashamed of myself whenever I give it out."

"All the rest of us saw into it soon enough," returned Priestly.

Sniffin looked furious. It was upon his tongue to retort that light brains were well adapted to light food, but he checked himself just in time. That would be including all the others of the company as well as Priestly, and that would never do.

"I—I was not paying very close attention to what was being said," he faltered.

"That is an easy way out of it," Priestly taunted. "I always thought that you drummers—"

"Commercial traveler, if you please," corrected Sniffin.

"Pardon me. I always thought that you commercial travelers were very sharp-witted, and were ever ready to catch on to anything in the way of riddle, joke or pun, that could be given."

"You have in mind an entirely different class of travelers," retorted Sniffin. "There is a class of travelers who spend the summer season in counting the ties between stations on the different lines of railroad throughout the country. I know nothing about them, except that they exist."

"No," corrected Priestly, "the class that I have in mind is the class to which you belong."

"If you two gentlemen are going to fight," observed Miss Drayton, "pray put it off until after we are done with our dinner. You are taking away our appetites."

"I crave your pardon," Sniffin hastened to apologize, "but you will see that it is not me [his grammar] that is to blame."

"Likewise do I," Priestly followed, "and I am willing to acknowledge all the blame. It is not surprising that such a feeble flow of wit should spoil your appetite. I will take care not

to invite another contest with Mr. Sniffin at meal-time."

Sniffin looked daggers at his tormentor, and would no doubt have liked to indulge in language that would have been out of place in the presence of ladies.

"If you two fellers don't stop yer wranglin'," vowed the old ranger, "we will have ter make ye keep apart. This is no time ter have sich discord in our own camp. Ye'd orter feel 'shamed o' yerselves."

This settled the matter for the time being, and the repast progressed in good order and peace. No one objected to the quality of meat that was served, and, spiced with a selection from German literature now and then, it was heartily enjoyed. The old ranger had provided plates enough for all, if simple pieces of flat rock could be by any stretch of the imagination called plates; but the cups were still so few that every one of them had to serve two or three mouths. Notwithstanding all these trifling inconveniences, however, the little company of castaways made merry and ate heartily.

"While we are all here together," Blanche Drayton presently observed, "I want to bring up a matter for consideration."

Every eye was turned upon her instantly.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Woodland, at whom she was looking.

"It is this: I and Miss Flint have decided that we will go no further for the present, but shall remain with Mr. Kingsley and his party."

The exclamations of surprise from Mr. and Mrs. Woodland, and from Miss DeVere and the others, were too numerous to be repeated here.

"What in the name of wonders do you mean by such a resolve as this?" was the first clear question, put by Mr. Woodland.

"It is rather a long story," said Blanche, "and it is with Mr. Kingsley's consent that I have brought the matter before you all. I will go ahead and put the case forth as plainly and briefly as I can."

With this, the young lady proceeded and told her story about as it is now known to the reader, holding nothing back.

After careful consideration it had been decided that it could do no harm to make the case known to them all.

Every person present listened in rapt attention. It was indeed a wondrous story.

"Really," exclaimed Mr. Sniffin, "that sounds like some old-time romance."

"It is remarkable!" cried Miss DeVere.

"And you are firmly resolved that you will stay here, are you?" questioned Mr. Woodland.

"Yes, sir," answered Blanche, "I am. Can you blame me?"

"Not in the least. But do you not think it would be better for you to get away with us to some town where you will be safe, and there await whatever discoveries Mr. Kingsley may make?"

"That is what I tried to advise," interposed Kingsley.

"I would not be content," objected Blanche, "and I insist upon remaining here to take part in the work."

"Then we, too, will remain, will we not?" suggested Olivia, turning to her guardian.

"Before you answer that," interrupted Blanche, "let me say this: I do not want you to think that it is in any way your duty to stay here because I do. It has been settled that as soon as it is possible Mr. Kingsley and his guide will conduct you to a place of safety, and then we will return and begin the work."

"As for me," said Mrs. Woodland, "I would like to stay and see the matter to the end. It is the chance of a lifetime to enjoy a romance in real life."

"That settles it with me," declared Mr. Woodland; "we will stay."

"Yes," added Mrs. Woodland, "for it will be more real enjoyment to spend a few quiet weeks here than it will be if we are constantly on the move. The only objectionable feature that I can see now is the presence of the outlaws."

"That is a very serious objection, too," observed Kingsley.

"Yes, it certainly is."

"But there is a wuss objection than that," put in the old ranger.

"What is that?" asked Woodland.

"It is th' objection that human critters nat'rally has ter goin' without anything ter eat. One dead hoss won't keep us long, an' hoss-meat, with nothin' else, will git ter be a rather tiresome dish, I reckon."

"We must fight it out on that line for the present, anyhow, whether we like it or not," observed Blanche. "When we can get out of the hands of the outlaws, then we can look around for something better."

"What have you two gentlemen got to say about it?" questioned Mr. Woodland, turning to Sniffin and Duff.

"It gives me the greatest pleasure to say that I shall be proud to remain with you and render whatever assistance I can in the work," Sniffin promptly answered, with a glance in the direction of his charmer—Olivia.

"I shall be happy to be allowed to do the same," asserted Duff, his glance going in the direction of Deborah Flint.

"It looks as if you will have plenty of company, then, Miss Drayton," remarked Kingsley.

"Yes," was the response, "it certainly does. Well, I am glad of it, for as soon as we can get clear of the outlaws we can set to work."

"It seems too wonderful a story to be true," reflected Woodland, for something like the twentieth time. "But, we are with you, Miss Drayton, and I am glad that we have something in view to occupy our thoughts and time."

There were glances full of meaning passing between Eugene Priestly and Major Arlington Kendrick. They had little to say.

The conversation ran on, there now being something to keep it up, and for a time German literature did not get much of a hearing. It ran on, in fact, until there came a sudden and startling interruption.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MESSAGE OF THE ARROW.

NAPOLEON, had suddenly stiffened up and growled, and in almost the same instant there came a flash before the eyes of those around the table, and a thud against the side of the cabin.

Every eye was turned there at once, and there stuck a quivering arrow, imbedded almost to the shaft in the solid wood.

"Blast it!" cried Riddles, "what is th' meanin' o' sich work, anyhow? If I was any believer in spooks an' sich, I would think that they was havin' a hand in all this funny work that is goin' on 'round here. This is what I call 'zasperatin', I do, by hokey. That arrer kem right over thar in that clump o' bushes, I should say, by th' line it aims as it sticks. I'd like ter know what th' p'izen critter means by sich funny business."

The clump of bushes in question was only a little way distant from the cabin, and it was indeed a matter of great wonder to imagine who had fired the arrow.

"It may be another communication from our friend," suggested Mrs. Woodland.

"There certainly is something tied around the shaft of the arrow, if that is the proper name for the thing," declared Blanche.

"You jest take a look at it, Kingsley," directed Old Riddles, "an' I will take a look around over thar whar it kem from."

The old guide started over toward the clump of bushes, taking no weapon with him except the knife that was in his belt, the dog following at his heels.

"It might not do ter start over thar with a rifle in my paws," he thought. "I might git one o' them pesky arrers inter my kerkiss, an' that would be ternel 'zasperatin', I should say. It would be a mean sinner that would shoot a feller when he is comin' wi' no weepin' o' war in his hands, it would, by hokey."

The old man walked leisurely over to the bushes, parted them, and looked in as coolly as though he was looking for his hat, or some other object equally as harmless.

There was no one there.

"Wal, this does beat th' Jews, an' no mistake," the ranger mused. "Whar has th' critter got to so quick? Is there any hole here that he could slink through?"

Parting the bushes still further, old Zeb looked carefully all around, and now discovered a passageway between two rocks, one that could hardly be seen at a casual glance. This explained the way the person who had fired the arrow had gone.

The old ranger opened the bushes still further and passed in, as he did so saying aloud:

"Critter, whoever ye be, thar's no need to shoot me, fer I ain't comin' wi' any evil 'tentions to'rds ye. If you are a friend I am willin' ter meet ye half way, an' more too. Fer these reasons jest hold yer shoot a leetle, an' mebbey we kin come ter terms in th' most peaceful way ye ever see'd."

There was certainly no harm in this precaution on the part of the old ranger, but there was no one there to hear his words.

When he had made his way in as far as the place where the two rocks stood, he became convinced that the person that had fired the arrow, whoever it had been, was there no longer, but had gone as silently and mysteriously as a shadow.

"Ding bast it!" the mountaineer muttered, "but this is real 'zasperatin', an' that is gilt-edge truth. Here, Napoleon, see what th' trail smells like."

The dog glided forward and sniffed the ground, and with a low growl was on the point of dashing forward when the old man called him back.

"Hold on, Napoleon, hold on," he ordered, "let's see what this is afore ye go any furdur."

What the old ranger had found was nothing more nor less than a slip of paper pinned with a stick into a little crevice in the rock.

Taking it down hastily, he read:

"If you value the life of your dog, old man, do not let it start upon this trail. We are your friends, but at the same time you do not want to be too full of curiosity."

FRIEND.

"Blast their pictur's, Nap, be we asleep an' dreamin' or have we got clean out of our heads? Sich funny proceedin's as this is a leetle more than we are used to. What in th' world is it all a-comin' ter, anyhow? I guess ye needn't go no

further on that trail, old dog, fer I reckon I do think a trifle of ye, an' I wouldn't want ter see ye stuck full o' them pesky arrers like any p'izen porky-pine. Come on, an' we'll go back an' see what was on that arrer, if there was any thing on it; an' from the past experience we have had in this business, I reckon there was."

Making his way out of the bushes, the ranger lost no time in getting back to the cabin for he was now filled with curiosity to learn what message the arrow had brought, if any at all.

"Hello, old man, what have you got there?" asked Kingsley, when he caught sight of the slip of paper old Zeb held in his hand.

"Oh, it is nothin' only another billy-duke," was the reply. "It is a gentle hint that I had better not foller th' trail of th' critter that fired this arrer, if I have any likin' fer good health. That is about what it means, I take it, though it is 'dressed to th' dog. What have you got?"

"This is a *billet-doux*, too," answered Kingsley. "It was tied around the shaft of the arrow. Pay attention, and I will read it aloud to you."

"All right, I am 'tention, so go ahead." Opening a sheet of paper which he had in his hand, Kingsley read:

"The man who left your camp this morning is a deserter. He has gone over to the camp of the Night Hawks. On his way there he made a discovery that may interest you. He found a human skeleton, and near it some sort of paper that was placed under a stone. I do not know what it was, but it seemed to interest him wonderfully. I will guide you to the place where the skeleton is lying. About half an hour after you get this you will see a smoke in a southerly direction from the cabin. It will be to guide you to the place where the skeleton is. Not more than two of you had better go there, for you must not neglect to guard the women of your party at the cabin. You have nothing to fear from me, but look out for the Hawks. FRIEND."

"Say," the old ranger remarked, when Kingsley had come to the end of the wonderful letter, "I wish some one of you would kick me right hard fer a few times. I would like ter know fer sure whether I am awake or not. This business will soon make a ravin' loonytick o' me."

"About the hardest batch of riddles you ever tackled, are they not?"

"They be fer a fact. I wonder what will be th' next thing on th' programme? I am prepared fer a'most anything now, an' I don't know of anything that could surprise me."

"Well, what do you think about this smoke signal? Do you think it is a plan to draw us into a trap?"

"Let me put on my thinkin' cap fer a minnit, an' I will try an' rattle with that problem. Say, is th' writin' o' this note th' same as that of th' others?"

"Yes, it is in th' same hand."

"Then I reckon it is all right. That critter, whoever it is, is our friend fast enough, an' it will be safe enough ter foller th' smoke signal, so fur as that is concerned. Th' only thing ter look out fer is th' outlaws."

"That is settled, then. Who shall be the ones to go?"

"Wal, I reckon it had better be you or me, Kingsley, but not both of us. If you want ter try it I will stay here an'—"

"No, I think you had better go, Zeb, for you know more about such work in one minute than I could learn in a week. You had better go, and I will remain here."

"All right, if that is 'greeable to you it is to me," said Riddles, "so I will undertake th' leetle job. Will you go along, Priestly?"

"Yes, certainly," answered Priestly, secretly glad of the opportunity.

"Well, come on, then, an' we will be goin'. Mebbe we wouldn't be able ter see ther smoke right from th' cabin here, if it is very fur away, so we'd better git up on th' hill where we kin see furdur."

"I'm right with you," responded the young man; "just bring out my rifle with you, if you please."

Old Riddles was just going into the cabin to get his own weapons.

"Sartainly," he replied, "I'll do that."

Priestly and Kendrick were standing close together, and as soon as the old man had disappeared, Priestly observed:

"What do you think of this turn of affairs?"

"You want to make the most of your chance," was the reply.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you want to keep your eyes wide open, and your ears too. If you can get hold of any other clew than the one we have, you must do so."

"Oh, I will take care of that part of it. There won't anything escape my eye, you bet."

"Do you know what thought has come to me?"

"No; how should I?"

"I thought perhaps the same idea had come to you. Whose skeleton do you imagine this may prove to be?"

"By gracious!" Priestly exclaimed, "I never thought of that! It may be the skeleton of that man Drayton."

"Right; and we know that he was either going to or coming from the place where the treasure is hid."

"I see, I see."

"And you want to mark well the place where this skeleton is, so that we can find it again. From there we may be able to go direct to the treasure."

"I will take care of all that, but you do not want to think that you will have this idea long to yourself, for Kingsley has a head on his shoulders that is not by any means made of putty. Whatever he can't see is not worth seeing."

"It may miss him, though, and— There, no more; here comes the old man."

Old Riddles came out of the cabin at that moment, and announced that he was ready to set out.

Priestly took his rifle from him, looked to see that it was in order, and it being so, the two men passed out of the camp.

"We won't foller th' trail that feller left that shot th' arrer," the old man remarked, "seein' as it is ag'in' orders, an' it ain't no use anyhow. All we have got ter do is ter git up on th' side o' th' mountain here, where we kin see around some distance, an' then wait fer th' smoke ter show up. Come on."

"What is your idea in regard to this thing?" Priestly asked.

"What thing?"

"Why, this skeleton that Terrill found."

"Wal, I hain't made up my mind very strong on th' matter, but I have a faint idee that it may possibly be th' skeleton o' that feller Drayton."

Priestly bit his lips. His suspicion that the major's thought was not likely to remain dead to the others, had come out just as he had feared.

"You may be right," he agreed.

"An' if I be," Riddles went on, "it may p'int th' way ter th' place whar th' treasure is hid. Ye know th' man was goin' back to th' place from th' road whar he had left th' copper envelope."

"Yes, that is so," said Priestly, and he saw how hopeless was the idea of the major that no one else would have the same thoughts that had come to him.

It went to prove that the major was no smarter than any one else.

No more was said then, and the old ranger led the way up the rocky hight.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SOME IMPORTANT FINDS.

"HA! there is the smoke!"

This exclamation was uttered by Priestly.

The two men had clambered up out of the valley to the side of the mountain on the south and west of the cabin, and were waiting for the signal.

As he spoke, Priestly pointed to the south, where a tiny column of smoke had just made its appearance.

"Yes, I have got my eye on it," returned Riddles.

At first the smoke was so thin and small in volume that it could hardly be seen, but it soon grew thicker and blacker.

"Shall we go for it?" Priestly asked.

"That is what we are here fur," was the answer; "so come right along. We'll see what will come of it. Th' feller that sent th' note sart'inly means business, or there wouldn't be no smoke. Come on."

They started on at once, the dog following at their heels.

In a little while they came to the stream of which mention has been frequently made, and in which Terrill had waded in order to hide his trail.

Here further progress to the south was blocked, for on the opposite side of the stream was a solid wall of rock, reaching to a hight of many feet.

Of course the smoke could not now be seen by them, but the old ranger had laid his course before starting, and knew which way to turn here.

"Come," he said, stepping boldly into the water, "we will do a little wadin'. It is th' best walkin' that I kin see, an' as we have got ter go up th' stream anyhow, we won't lose no time in climbin' round over rocks an' sich."

Priestly followed his lead, and they made their way along in the same manner as Terrill had done earlier in the day.

So they continued on until they came to the second fall, where their further progress was blocked.

All the way along the old man had been looking for some place where he could leave the stream and turn more directly to the south, but finding no very favorable one to invite him, and the stream bearing to the south a little more as it was followed along, he had held to its course.

"Wal, I reckon we have gone fur enough in this d'rection, seein' as we can't go no furdur," was his exclamation, when he found his way barred. "We will git out o' th' water an' try dry land fur a while."

They clambered out, and there paused to rest.

Again the column of smoke was plainly seen, and they were glad to find that they were a little nearer to it.

"It seems funny ter me," the old ranger observed, as he stood leaning upon his rifle, resting a little, "what brought that rascal of a Terrill away out in this direction. What reason had he ter go away over thar whar that smoke is?"

"You will have to ask me something a good deal easier than that," returned his companion.

"When he left th' camp he set out to'ards th' east," the old man went on, "an' what made him turn an' come way over here I can't see."

The dog, which had been smelling around, suddenly whined.

"Ha, what ha' you found?" Old Riddles demanded, looking quickly up.

The dog barked and started off on the trail left by Terrill.

"Hold on, you homely cur, an' come back here," the old man ordered. "I didn't tell yer to start off like that, did I?"

The well-trained animal came back at once.

"Now," the old ranger questioned, "whose trail is that?"

"Don't ask me," answered Priestly.

"Let me reason th' thing a leetle," the ranger went on. "It couldn't very well be th' one that made th' fire that makes that smoke over thar, fer that is 'most a mile away, an' ter git thar so quick th' feller would have ter fly. Mebbe it is th' one that fired th' arrer."

"You think there are more than one of them, then?"

"Yas, ter be sure. Th' one that fired th' arrer couldn't git that fur so soon as this, an' more than that, th' one that writ th' note that I found said: 'We are your friends.' 'We' means more'n one, I reckon."

"Yes; that point had slipped me."

"But I don't reckon that is th' one that kem this way. Ye remember that th' place whar th' arrer was fired from was on th' other side o' th' cabin, an' he couldn't git round here so much ahead o' us. No, that ain't it, an' now th' idee comes ter me that I see through th' hull business."

"Well, what do you see?"

"I'll tell ye. I see that feller Terrill comin' up this heur stream ter hide his trail, that is what I see; an' that is jest th' secret of it. I mean ter say that I see him in my mind's eye, ye understand."

"Yes, I understand, and that is quite reasonable. But, had we not better be pressing on?"

"Ter be sure; but what I was comin' at, if this trail is th' one that feller made, an' he happens ter know th' hills better than I think he does, mebbe he has gone th' best way. We'll let th' dog foller th' trail, an' we will foller th' dog; an' then if we find th' dog don't lead us to'rds th' smoke, we kin soon turn. Come on."

Old Riddles usually closed every debate with the invitation to "come on," and they went on accordingly, the dog leading the way.

For some little time the smoke was lost sight of, but when they came out to a place where they could see it again, they found that the dog had been leading them almost directly toward it.

"I reckon that I was about right," the old ranger said, "an' now it won't take us very long to git over there. Come on."

They had stopped for a moment to rest, so the call to come on was all right.

On they went, and in due time they came to the place where the smoke arose from. It was made by a small fire that was smoldering under the weight of heavy stones.

A little distant from the fire lay the skeleton of Horace Drayton.

"Here it is, sure enough," remarked Priestly, turning not a little pale at the unusual sight.

"Yes, here it is," owned the old man, and here is another one of them billy dukes that we are gittin' so many of."

"Where?"

"Right here," stooping as he spoke and taking a slip of paper from one of the sightless orbs.

"What does it say?" asked the younger man, all impatient to learn.

"Jest let me git it onfolded, an' I will onwind it ter yer," was the reply.

When he had got it "onfolded," the old man read it first to himself, and then aloud.

It ran as follows:

"You are again warned not to follow our trail. The one made by the deserter leads south; ours to the west. Look under the smaller of the two stones. SPIRITS OF THE MOUNTAINS."

"Spirits of the Mountains, eh?" repeated Priestly.

"Yas, an' that is quite a fancy name, too, ain't it. Now, I'll bet th' best gold-mine that has ever been found in this heur hild State that th' Sperrit o' th' Mountain is a woman."

"What makes ye think that?"

"Why, nobody but a woman would think o' sich a name. I don't go one cent on th' hoss-sense o' any woman that I sever see. Th' idee o' sayin' speerit to sich a old hard-head as I be. Why, it is really amoosin'."

"It does sound rather womanish, now that you make me think of it," agreed the younger man, "and I do not doubt but that you are right."

"All right, Mrs. Sperrit-o'-th'-Mountain,"

said the old man, as he put the paper away, "we won't foller ye, but we will take a look under this heur rock, jest ez you say."

The two stones in question were the ones between which Terrill had found the sheet of parchment.

Old Riddles stepped forward to them, and lifted the under one.

Beneath it lay the remainder of the hat of which a piece had been found by Terrill.

"Heur's a nest-egg, sure's ye live," he exclaimed. "I tell ye, young man, this business is about one of th' greatest things that Old Zeb Horn ever had anything ter do with. Take it all tergether, it is somethin' of a mystery. What is more, I have an idea that it is goin' ter be a wuss one afore it is done with."

"What makes you think that?"

"Why, can't ye see? That feller Terrill has no doubt found th' rest of th' papers that Kingsley would like ter git hold of, an' if one o' them is th' map, you will see th' hull outlaw tribe after that treasure like flies after 'lasses. That is what is th' matter with Hanner, an' if there ain't music in ther air afore very long, then I miss my guess."

"By George! you are right."

"In course I am! There has got ter be some lively work done, an' some mighty sly work, too, ter git ahead o' them outlaws. But let's see what we have found here. Mebbe that feller didn't git hold o' th' best part of th' business, after all."

Taking up all that was left of the old hat, the ranger shook its contents out upon the ground.

There were a watch and chain, a ring, some silver money, and several other little articles of which no particular mention need be made.

The ring was a good gold one, and was set with a large stone, the letters H. D. being cut in monogram in the latter. The watch was of silver, and was somewhat corroded. The chain was a plated one, and was in tolerably good condition. At the end of the chain was a gold locket.

Priestly saw the latter at once, and while the old man was looking at the ring, asked permission to open it.

"Sartainly," was the response, "open th' thing if it is meant ter be opened. I don't know much about sich things, an' we want ter git at th' hull business while we are about it."

Priestly took the locket, and after some little trouble succeeded in opening it.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, "this tells the story."

"What does it tell?" the old ranger inquired.

"Look and see. Here are two pictures that will throw some light upon the truth of the matter."

The old guide hastened to look as invited, and saw that his companion had spoken truly.

The locket contained two likenesses, very small in size, but they were as well preserved as though they had been taken only a few days instead of many years. One was that of a man, rather a noble-looking face; and the other was that of a woman. The latter was decidedly a pretty face, rather girlish in outline, but sweet and womanly withal, and Old Riddles looked at it long and earnestly.

"Blast my old hat!" he presently exclaimed, "if that ain't th' mother o' that chick at th' old cabin, then I don't know what I'm talkin' about."

CHAPTER XXV.

ROUGH ON DUFF.

"TEN to one that you are right," coincided Priestly, "for that is what we would naturally expect to find in the locket, if we found any pictures at all. There is no doubt that this is the missing man."

"Oh, no, that is all settled, an' now th' question is, how are we ter break th' news to th' gal? It won't do ter take these bones an' dump 'em down afore her an' say: Heur, miss, heur's yer dad; oh, no, not a tall."

Priestly laughed.

"I should rather say not," he agreed. "We must show some decency of feeling about the matter. What is your idea?"

"Hang me if I know much about sich business," the old ranger confessed. "I have allus kept away from th' wimmin purty much, an' I ain't up to th' rules o' s'ciety in sich dellerate p'int's o' fashion. How do they do it out East?"

Priestly had to laugh again.

"Well," he confessed, "this is such an unusual point that I guess no one would have any other rule to go by than the rule of common sense."

"Oh, wal if that is th' case," the old man averred, "I reckon that I am all up in th' rules o' itty-kit on th' p'int. I venture ter say it would be about th' proper thing ter do ter lay these bones carefully behind some o' these rocks, mark th' place so as we kin find it ag'in, an' git back to th' cabin without any more delay. Then we kin break th' news gently as ter what we have found, an' when th' trouble is over, then th' bones kin be taken up an' prepared fer totin' along wi' us ter th' settlements."

"That is about the best that can be done, I guess," agreed Priestly, "so let us set to work and do it."

This they did, and in a few minutes their task was finished.

While they were at work, Priestly was looking around constantly in the hope of finding something that would lead him to the rock of the cross, or better still, to the place where the treasure was hidden.

He looked in vain, however.

When their work was done, the old man turned to him and remarked:

"I see that you was lookin' around purty sharp, young man; was ye in th' hope that ye would find somethin' more?"

"Well, yes," replied Priestly, "I thought that I might make some other discovery."

He saw that it would be of no use for him to try to hide his thoughts from the keen eyes of the old ranger.

"Yas, I was lookin' some myself," the old man rejoined, "but I didn't find anything. I thought that mebbey th' rock o' th' cross might pop out inter sight, or else th' treasure itself; but narry a pop. Wal, let's paddle back ter th' cabin, an' see how things is goin' on there. Come on."

While talking, Old Zeb had put away in his pockets the articles he had found, and now the two men set out upon their return to the old cabin.

In the mean time, while nothing of really exciting interest had taken place at the cabin, there had been a brief interview between two of the persons there that may be of interest to the plan of our story.

Deborah Flint had strolled down to the stream behind the cabin, alone, and had been seated perhaps ten minutes upon the rock which we have before mentioned as the meeting-place of Miss Drayton and Philip Kingsley, when Major Arlington Kendrick wandered down that way and joined her.

"Ah, Miss Flint," he observed, "this is a pleasure indeed. I have been wanting to see you alone, but have never found the opportunity till now. May I sit down here on this lesser rock at your feet?"

"You are welcome to sit where you choose," was the reply; "I am going back to the cabin. I was just on the point of starting when you came," and as she spoke, the maiden arose and started.

"Miss Flint, pray remain one moment," the major requested earnestly; "I have something of the utmost importance to say to you."

"Well, say it just as quick as you can, then," ordered the lady, as she stopped to listen.

She did not turn around at once to face the major, and the expression of her face seemed to say that she knew, or strongly suspected, what was coming.

"Allow me first to thank you for this favor, your deigning to listen to me," said the gallant major, as with hat in hand he stepped forward nearly to her side; "it is a favor that I hardly hoped for."

"There! there!" interrupted Deborah, "you are near enough, so stop where you are and say what you have to say."

"I will hasten with it, and will not detain you a moment longer than possible. I hope you will forgive me—"

"There, now," the lady interrupted again, "don't go to getting soft, but say what you have got to say and let that settle it. Now, if you do not come to the point immediately, I shall go on."

"Then I will come immediately to the point. When I first saw you, I had no idea where I had ever seen you before, and yet your name sounded very familiar to my ears. I could not, however, recall the name of Drayton, the name of that charming young lady who is with you, you know. Where had I ever met you before? was the question that was in my mind all the time."

"Then I had the advantage of you," declared the maiden lady, "for I knew you the moment that I set eyes upon you."

"You did?" in great surprise.

"Yes, I did."

"And why did you not make yourself known?"

"Because I had no desire to renew your acquaintance."

"Really, Miss Flint, you are plain and blunt in your address, but I can overlook all that. I know you never had much affection for me—"

"Affection? I hated you!"

"Yes, I suppose you did. But, let me get on with what I wanted to say."

"Yes, do; and cut it as short as you can. You will not get another chance to speak to me; that I assure you."

"Well, no doubt you remember that some years ago you were located at the pretty town of Dorchester, in one of the Eastern States, at a large boarding-school. You had under your care a young lady whose name was Clara Haverlay. She was as pretty as a rose, and I, far younger then than I am now, fell desperately in love with her. Only for you, I am sure that I could have won her love in return, and my life would have been far happier than it has been. You stood in the way, however, and my case was hopeless."

"Yes, thank goodness I was there to protect my darling from you."

"How severe you are, Miss Flint. Your nature is not unlike your name."

"Thank you for your compliment; and now if you are done, I will go on to the cabin."

"I am not done, if you will bear with me for a moment more."

"Well, hurry up, for I may as well hear the end of what you want to say here and now. You must never bring it up again. Go on."

"I have little more to say," the major continued. "I loved Clara Haverlay as truly as man ever loved, and only for you I might have made her my wife—"

"Thank goodness I was there!"

"I see that I have little to hope from you, but I will go on and finish what I started to say."

"I cannot imagine what it is you want now, since the past is past and gone."

"No, I suppose not, but I will tell you. As truly as I loved the mother then, so truly do I love the daughter now. I—"

"You wretch!"

"Thank you. I am now far better fixed in this world's goods than I was in the old time, and I can make that girl a happy home. I will be to her a devoted and loving husband, and she will never know care or sorrow. I—"

"You miserable old rascal!" cried Miss Flint, angrily, "you are almost old enough to be the young lady's grandfather! If I was opposed to your marrying her mother, I am sure that you shall not marry her. You had better go and ask the lady for her hand, and see what she will tell you. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

The major laughed.

"Perhaps I had," he returned, "but I am not, not in the least. On the contrary, I am proud of the opportunity that offers for becoming a more than friend to the daughter of the only woman I ever loved. I certainly shall ask the young lady, and it will be something of a surprise to you, no doubt, if she is willing to accept me; will it not?"

"Yes, it certainly will. You are a crazy old fool! Blanche Drayton will not listen to you, nor will I listen to you any longer. I am going to the cabin, and I warn you never to speak to me again."

"I shall not do so, if it can be avoided, that I assure you. You are not the most amiable creature in the world."

For one instant the enraged woman turned upon him in fury, as though she would tear his eyes out, but she quickly changed her mind, and with a toss of her head and a curl of her lip that expressed more than words, walked away toward the cabin; the major lifting his hat and bowing after her in mock politeness.

"She is the same as ever," the major muttered. "She spoiled one good chance for me, but she will not another. That girl shall be mine."

Miss Flint walked straight on toward the cabin; at not a very lively pace, however, for her rheumatism was troubling her a little more than usual. She heeded not the pain of that, though, for she was so angry that she hardly felt it. In her hand was an umbrella, with which she was unconsciously assisting herself along; a companion that seldom left her for a moment, rain or shine.

The very first person she met at the cabin was Barrington Duff.

"Ah, here you are, eh?" he greeted, lifting his hat and bowing in very much the same manner as the major had so recently done, but with a far different purpose at heart; "I cannot begin to tell how—"

"There, now, shut right up and get out of my way," Deborah ordered, sharply. "I don't want to hear any nonsense out of you."

Duff colored a little, but did not lose his grip.

"I cannot begin to tell how glad I am to meet you," he finished, "for I have hardly found a chance to speak to you to-day. I truly sympathize with you, that I assure you. Your—"

"Oh, dry up, and let me pass!"

Duff did not lose patience for an instant, but went right on.

"Your corns are no doubt a little more troublesome to-day than usual, and—"

"Sir-r-rh!"

"And that accounts for your ill-temper. If you would only let me apply—"

At that instant up went Miss Flint's umbrella, and down it came upon the head of the corn-doctor with all the force the angry old maid could command.

"There!" she cried, "take that! and if you ever dare to say corns to me again I'll half kill you!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

OLD RIDDLES'S PASTIME.

WHEN Old Riddles and Eugene Priestly arrived at the cabin, they were pressed at once for information.

What had they found?—what had they learned?

They told their story, and it need not be said that it was listened to with eager attention.

"But, the things you found," urged Deborah, "let us see them."

They were quickly produced.

When the locket was shown, and Deborah got a view of the faces it contained, she gave one scream and then burst into tears.

It was not necessary to ask her if she recognized the faces.

As soon as she could control her voice, she said:

"These are the likenesses of Mr. and Mrs. Drayton, taken when they were married. There is no possible chance for mistake; I knew them too well not to remember their looks."

Blanche took the locket with trembling hand, and gazed long and earnestly upon the features of her dead parents.

"It is certainly my mother," she said, "and it must be my father also, for I can recall such a face by looking away back into my early childhood. It is certainly they, and I am glad that poor father's fate is known at last, horrible as it is."

The young lady was weeping, but she had control of her voice.

"It is sartainly too bad, miss," the old ranger sympathized, "but I allus hold that it is better ter know th' truth than ter be a-livin' on in on-sartainty. You will feel a heap more contented in yer mind when th' shock of th' thing is over an' you can know fer sartain that yer parents are restin' side by side."

This served to make the young lady weep the more, and the old guide felt that he had put his foot into it of a truth.

"I beg yer pardon, miss," he hastened to add; "I didn't mean ter make matters wuss, but it seems that is jest what I have done. I am a rough old fool, that is what I am, an' I ain't fit ter live with gentler folks. I hope you will forgive me."

As he spoke thus, his eyes filled with tears.

Blanche rose and took his hand, saying:

"Do not blame yourself for anything, Mr. Horn, pray don't! It was the very kindness of your words and tone that made me break down so. You did not make the matter worse, but a great deal better. I understand your honest old heart, and I love you as a very dear friend, indeed."

The tears in the old man's eyes began to roll down his sun-browned cheeks, and with a great gulp he drew his hand away from the young lady's grasp and made a bolt for the door.

"Come on, Napoleon," he said in a husky voice to his dog; "this ain't no place fer us. We never could git on with th' wimmin critters, an' we never will. Th' best thing that we kin do is ter strike out fer th' desert lands an' stay thar. Come on."

"You are not going away, are you?" cried Blanche, in alarm. "I hope that I have not offended you."

"Not very fur, miss, not very fur," was the reply. "I will be back ag'in. I only want—want—ter—Come on, Nap, blast yer homely kerkiss! what is ther matter with yer? Come on!"

The tender-hearted old man could say no more, so he beat a hasty retreat.

"That man has a heart as true as gold," observed Kingsley.

"He has, indeed!" agreed several of the others in one voice.

"Well, there is one more step taken toward the unwinding of the secret," remarked Woodland. "If it were not for the presence of the outlaws, the rest of the work might soon be accomplished."

"Yes," responded Kingsley; "quite true. I would like to get hold of that map that Terrill found, for with that to aid us, we could no doubt go direct to the hiding-place. As it is, the outlaws will be hunting around on a false trail, and we shall be blundering along with only half a guiding-plan."

"There is no foreseeing what the future will bring forth," said Blanche, "and I must confess that I do not feel by any means at ease. I hope that it will come out all right, and that none of our party will get into trouble—that is, any worse trouble than we are in already."

While this conversation was going on, and it was carried to far too great a length for repetition here, let us follow Old Riddles.

The old man walked quite a distance away from the cabin, and, seating himself upon a rock, began to caress his dog.

"Good dog, Napoleon, good dog," he said, patting the animal upon its head. "I kin see that you are down in th' mouth, an' quite fur down, too. What is it that ye are pinin' fer? It seems that we ain't good fer much down here in this world, but I reckon th' good Master will have a corner to put us inter when we go to th' other land. Let us hope so, anyhow. I reckon that I feel about as lumpy in th' throat as I ever did in all my life. Is that th' way that you feel? Let's see how a dose or two o' riddles would work on us. It seems ter me they would brighten us up. Don't it seem so ter you?"

Taking his rifle between his knees, as he usually held it when consulting his little book, he brought the well-loved volume forth from its hiding place, opened it, and began to read.

Presently he smiled. In a little while he smiled still more. This was soon followed by a

grin that spread from ear to ear, and ere long he burst out in a hearty laugh.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he roared, "here is a good one, Napoleon, a mighty good one. Be ye ready fer it?"

Roused up by its master's sudden burst of merriment, the dog sat up and whipped its tail on the ground.

"I thought that would wake ye up, old feller," the old man said; "an' now I'll try an' wake ye up a good deal more. Jest tune yer ears ter this: Why is a mouse like grass? Put on yer thinkin' cap, now, an' see if ye kin git away with that."

The dog paid close attention, whipping its tail a little livelier.

"Give it up, do ye?" the old ranger took for granted, after a moment's pause; "well, then, I'll have ter tell ye. A mouse is like grass because th' cat'll eat it. Ha, ha, ha! d'ye see it? Th' cat'll eat th' mouse an' th' cattle eat th' grass. That is what I call a purty good one, Napoleon, a purty good one."

The dog barked, and otherwise showed its willingness to engage in a little play, if its master was bound that it should.

The old man looked upon it as the result of the riddle.

"I thought that would please ye, my good dog," he chuckled, "I thought it would. Now here is another one fer ye ter rattle with: Which is th' heavier, a half-moon or a full moon? That will make ye scratch yer head, I'm thinkin'."

The dog barked and frisked about a little, willing to do its part in the expected frolic.

"Ha, ha, ha! ye think ye could guess that one, do ye? Wal, now, it is too bad you can't talk, fer I'd jest like ter hear what sort o' answers ye would give. Bein' as ye can't, howsumever, I reckon I'll have ter tell ye 'em all. A half-moon is heavier than a full one, because a full one is a good deal lighter. Ha, ha, ha! that is what I call a stavin' good one. Don't ye begin ter feel sort o' cheered up, old dog? Ye sartainly act as though ye do, anyhow. Now here is still another fer ye ter rattle with: Why is a pulled-out tooth like a thing forgot? There, now, that one will worry ye some, old feller. Why is it?"

Waiting a moment and looking at the dog as though he really thought it ought to say something, the old man went on.

"Well," he said, "if ye give it up I'll tell ye. Th' reason that a pulled-out tooth is like a thing forgot, is because it is out of the head. Ha, ha, ha! that war a purty good one, now wasn't it? Oh, I tell ye what it is, old dog, there is nothin' like good riddles ter drive away th' blues. I thought I'd wake ye up, I did, by hokey! I never see a dog so mighty fond o' riddles as you be. Now here is another: What is that which is made longer by bein' cut away at both ends? Ho, ho, ho! that one will weaken ye, old feller, sure's ye live."

When he laughed the old ranger clapped his hands upon his legs and fairly howled, and the dog jumped and frisked around in great delight. The animal was ever ready for this kind of play.

"Can't guess it, eh?" Old Zeb cried, after another pause; "wal, then, here is th' answer to it—fer I wouldn't give a snap fer riddles wi' no answers to 'em: Th' thing that is made longer by bein' cut away at both ends, is a ditch. Ha, ha, ha! now that is another good one, Napoleon, another mighty good one."

The merrier the old man became, the merrier became the dog, and the latter jumped and frisked and danced around as though it had lost its reason.

"Oh, but these is good fer ye, Napoleon, they be fer a fact. I knowed that I could brighten ye up, if I once got out th' old book. D'ye want any more? Do, eh? wal now let's see what I kin find. Here is some that I don't really understand very well, but bein' as they are here in the book, with th' answers to 'em, I reckon they are all right. Here is one of 'em: Why is a very drunken man like a noun adjective? Now I haven't th' least idee what a noun adjective is, but that is th' riddle."

Whenever the riddles puzzled him a little, the old man was not so enthusiastic over them, and the dog was correspondingly less frolicsome.

"I guess that one stumps ye bad, Napoleon, don't it? It don't seem ter me ter be fair ter put any riddles in th' book that common folks can't understand. I will give ye th' answer ter that one, fer ye would never guess it. Th' reason that a very drunken man is like a noun adjective, is because he seldom stands alone. An' now here is another hard one: What is th' difference between a cat and a comma? Now I know what a cat is well enough, but ding bast me if I know what a comma is. I reckon it is somethin' in th' way of fish. No matter, here is th' answer: A cat has its claws at the end of its paws, while a comma is a pause at the end of a clause. That may be all right, Napoleon, but I can't laugh because I don't understand it. Now here is another: What is th' first thing that a gardener sets in his garden? Ha, ha, ha! that is one ye orter git away with, Napoleon, sure."

The moment the old man laughed and slapped

his leg again, the dog became as playful as ever.

"Ha! that is th' kind that hits ye, old feller, ain't it!" the old man exclaimed. "There is some sense in these easy ones. Th' first thing that a gardener sets in his garden is his foot. Ha, ha, ha! that hits ye, that I kin see. Now try this one: What is th' difference between a farmer and a seamstress? Now that is one that will make yer hair curl, that I'll bet on."

He waited a moment, giving the dog a fair chance.

"Can't guess it, eh? Wal, here is th' answer: The farmer gathers what he sows, an' th' seamstress sews what she gathers. That is a good one, Napoleon, a mighty good one. And now here is another."

So the old man went on, riddle after riddle, until nearly an hour had passed. Even then he showed no signs of tiring of his pleasure, but he was interrupted. On looking up he saw Miss De Vere coming toward the place where he was seated, and she was almost upon him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

OLD RIDDLES IN TROUBLE.

THE old man made a hasty move to get his book out of sight, but the lady was too close to him for him to do so before she came up.

"Do not let me interrupt your reading, Mr. Horn," she said, "go right on. I think you must have found something of a very jolly nature, to judge by the way you were laughing."

Olivia was not aware that the old ranger carried a book of riddles with him, though she knew he was very fond of them, and had quite a stock in store.

"Wal, yes, I was tryin' ter amooz myself an' th' dog a little, miss," he owned. "Do they want me at th' cabin?"

"Not that I am aware of," was the reply. "I just strolled out, and hearing you laughing so heartily, thought I would come on and see what was amusing you so."

"Wal, I was jest readin' some riddles ter th' dog heur, that was all. Ye see there is nothin' that Napoleon likes so well as riddles, an' whenever I have a little time ter spare, I read 'em ter him. I guess he has had enough ter last him fer some days ter come now."

"Do not put away your book, pray; I should like to hear some of the riddles myself. There must be a charm about them, since you are so fond of them."

"It ain't me so much as it is th' dog," the old man averred.

"Well, let me hear some of them, anyhow."

"Wal, really, miss, I am used ter takin' 'em hit or miss, an' mebbe I wouldn't git hold o' very good ones. I hope you will 'skuse me."

"No, sir, I will not excuse you at all. I hope you will not refuse me. I shall certainly be charmed to listen to them, that I know."

"Wal, it is your own fault if you ain't, that is all, an' sence ye insist on it I will give you one or two. Now let's see what it shall be."

"Let it be anything that first comes to mind, or rather the first thing that meets your eye. Then perhaps I can think of something that will interest you from my store of knowledge. Have you ever read Goethe?"

"Have I ever read Gertie? I don't think I ever heard o' her. Who is she? Did you mean ter say 'read'?"

"Yes, that was what I meant to say. Goethe was a great poet, you know, and any one who has not read his works has not begun to live. I presume you have never had the opportunity, however. I admire Goethe very much."

"No, I don't know nothin' about it," the old man confessed. "I am of th' opine, howsumever, that I have been livin' right along without Gertie, an' no doubt I shall be able ter finish th' race jest th' same. Is Gertie dead?"

"Dead! why, to be sure he is."

"Then he is all right, I reckon. No, I have never read an of his doin's, an' I reckon I never shall."

"You will never know what grand things you have missed, then. He was the monarch of them all. Listen to this, and tell me how you like it:

"Know'st thou the land where flowers of citron bloom,
The golden orange glows through leafy gloom,
From the blue heavens the breezes float so bland,
The myrtle still, and tall the laurels stand."

"Is that a riddle?" the old man asked, all in earnest.

"Goodness, no! it is a selection from a master poet—even Goethe. Don't you think it is grand?"

"It may be, but really I can't say that I understand it. I know what he says all right, but I am afraid that I don't know what he is talkin' about."

"Poor man," Olivia sighed, "one cannot help pitying you. I suppose you have never read Schiller, either, have you?"

"I reckon not, miss."

"It is Schiller who says—

"'Tis Jupiter who brings whate'er is great,
And Venus who brings everything that's fair."

"Never heard o' any of 'em," declared the old

man, solemnly. "They are all dead an' gone, I s'p' se."

"Oh, yes, Schiller is dead too. He flourished between 1759 and 1805, you know, and rode rival by the side of Goethe."

"Poor fellers."

"And then there was Herder, the kingliest of all his peers, whom perhaps you have read a little of."

"No, I never heard er him nuther."

"He lived between 1744 and 1803, and I admire him greatly. Oh, I do love the grand old men of that period."

"You didn't live in them days, I should say, did you?" the old ranger asked.

"Bless me, no!"

"Then how comes it that you know so much about them?"

"By reading and studying their works, my good old friend."

"Oh, I see. Well, what did Herder have ter say?"

"Oh, he said many things. Can I recall anything just now? Ah, yes, here are a few lines that come to mind:

"Slumber well meanwhile, thou sluggish burden
Of my earthly walk. Her mantle
Over thee spreads the Night, and her lamps
Burn above thee in the holy pavilion."

"Ding bast it, but he had 'em bad, didn't he. D'ye know any more of 'em?"

"Oh, yes, sir; there were Lessing, Klopstock, Wieland, and others. But, I am rattling on, and you are waiting patiently to read something from your book. Pray pardon me, and go ahead."

"What I was goin' ter ask ye," remarked the old man, "did any o' them great fellers that you speak of write riddles?"

The young lady had to laugh.

"No, sir," she replied, "I guess none of them ever did."

"Then I wouldn't give a cat's skin fer all th' books they ever writ. About th' only book that I ever read is this one, an' there is more in it than I ever expect to master. There is some o' these riddles that I don't really understand, an' I am a leetle in doubt whether they was meant ter be understood."

"Is that so? Suppose you give me one of that kind, and let me see if I can explain it for you."

"Wal, let me see if I kin find one right handy. I was jest givin' some o' that sort to Napoleon when you kem up. Yes, here is one: Why would a sea captain make a good fighter in the ring?"

"Really I must give it up."

"Wal, th' book says, Because he is used ter boxin' th' compass. D'ye see inter it?"

"Oh, yes, that is plain;" and the young lady tried to make it plain to the old man.

"No doubt you are right," he owned, "an' if I had been used ter th' way o' th' sea I would ha' been able ter see inter it. Now here is another: What letter in th' alphabet is most useful to a deaf woman?"

"What letter in the alphabet is most useful to a deaf woman?" the young lady repeated in a wondering tone.

"That is what th' book says, miss."

"I must give it up. What is the answer to it?"

"Wal, it says: The most useful letter to a deaf woman is A, because it makes her hear. Now, if you kin explain that ter me you will do me a great favor. I have been puzzlin' my head over that fer many a day. How it can be that th' letter A kin make anybody hear is more then I kin see."

The young lady had to laugh.

"Have you not the spelling of the two words?" she asked.

"No, I don't reckon I have," was the reply. "What has th' spellin' got ter do with th' riddle part of it?"

"Why, you see *her* is spelled h-e-r; and when the letter A is put in, in the right place, it makes the word *hear*—h-e-a-r."

"Wal, ding bast my stupid old head!" the old ranger exclaimed. "It is funny that I couldn't see inter that afore. That is th' great advantage of havin' a eddycation. No doubt a good many more of 'em is answered in purty much th' same way. Now here is another: Why should I be the happiest of all the vowels? Now if I only knowed what vowels is, I might git away with th' meanin' o' that; but I don't."

The young lady quickly explained what they are, but was unable to guess the riddle.

"I shall have to give up again," she confessed; "what is the answer?"

"Wal, here is what th' book says: I should be the happiest of all the vowels because it is the only one always in bliss, while the others are found in Purgatory and Hell."

"That is a good one," declared Olivia, "a very good one. You understand it now, do you not? The vowels are the letters A, E, I, O, U, and you see where they are found in these words. Now, have you any more there that you do not quite understand?"

"Well, no, there is none comes under my eye just now, but there is some that I do understand, if ye care ter listen ter any more of 'em."

"Certainly; I find them very entertaining."

"Wal, then, jest rattle with this one: Why is paper like a beggar?"

The young lady thought for a moment, but finally gave it up.

"I cannot guess it," she confessed, "so you will have to tell me. Why is it?"

"Because it is composed of rags."

"That is another quite good one. Give us another."

"Wal, why is a slanderer like a bedbug?"

There was another thoughtful pause, and then the fair guesser gave up as before.

"Because it is a back-biter," the old man explained. "And now here is another one: What is that which is brought to th' table, cut and mixed and passed around, and yet is never eaten, although some at th' table may eagerly call for more?"

"Oh dear me!" the young lady exclaimed, "I am sure that I shall never be able to guess that one. I cannot think of anything that can possibly fill those conditions. What can it be?"

"It is a pack o' cards," the old ranger explained, laughing heartily.

"Who would have thought of that?"

If Old Riddles could have seen the three evil-looking faces that at that moment appeared at a little distance behind him, there would have been an end to the riddles for the time being. As he did not see them, however, and as the thought of danger had for the moment slipped his mind, he went right on, while the three men of the evil-looking faces crept stealthily upon him from their hiding-place.

"Yas, that is what I call a purty good one," he declared. "Now here is still another: What is the difference between a sick Jew and a diamond?"

"Bless me, I can never guess that one; what is it?"

"One is a jew-el and the other is a Jew-ill."

At that instant the old ranger's dog sprung up with a fierce growl, and began to bark furiously, and the old man looking around, was startled to find himself covered by three hungry-looking rifles.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A PRETTY CLEVER TRICK.

"WAL, blast yer homely mugs!" he exclaimed, "what is ther meanin' o' this heur sort o' work! What fer ye p'intin' them things at me, fur?"

"It means that your time has about come," one of the men answered. "You have let ye'r-self drop inter our hands as nice as ye please, an' now ye won't git out in a hurry, you kin bet."

"Is that so? Wal, that is news ter me, an' that is gilt-edge truth. What do ye expect ye're goin' ter do wi' me?"

"You will find that out all in good time. All you have got ter do now is ter let that 'ar rifle drop an' h'ist yer hands. See how quickly you can do it?"

"Don't crowd me too fast," the old mountaineer requested, "let's 'tend to one thing at a time. Now," as he leaned upon the stock of his rifle, his arms folded and his left foot advanced, "who be you fellers, an' what d'ye mean by comin' 'round here in this way an' tryin' ter make a muss? Shut up yer barkin', Napoleon, I can't hear myself think fer th' noise you make. Here, gal, take th' dog to th' cabin."

"No she don't, nuther," cried one of the men.

"That is a good trick, old man, but it won't work with us. We want th' gal an' th' dog an' th' whole business. It would be a fine thing fer us ter let th' gal go to th' cabin an' tell that yer had got inter trouble, now wouldn't it. Oh, no, we ain't so green as all that, not by a big sight. Up with yer hands, now, or there will be a funeral in this camp and you will be th' chief attraction."

"Wal, now, don't be in sich a hurry," the old man still parleyed. "There is a plenty o' time if you would only think so. I would like ter know who ye are."

"If it will do ye any good we don't mind tellin' ye that we are three of th' Night Hawks, an' that we have come over here ter 'venge our late pardner, Burke Grinder. We have heard that you burnt him at th' stake till he was about half-dead, an' then ye shot him th' rest of th' way dead. If that is th' case, an' we reckon it is, you have got ter suffer fer it in th' wu'st kind o' way that ye kin think of."

"It is a ding basted lie!" the old ranger cried. "It is true that we did put him to th' stake to make him talk, but we didn't burn a hair. He would got out all in good order too, fer he was talkin' all right, but that p'izen critter of a Ter-rill shot him from th' hill, jest ter keep his head shut. That is th' gilt-edge truth of th' hull business."

The men looked at one another in surprise, and the old man was quick to note it.

"That is jest th' way it was," he repeated. "I s'pose, howsumever, that that p'izen critter has told ye th' lie about it, and only ter save his own neck. We know that feller, we do, an' if you don't hang him we shall have ter do it. We ain't afeerd ter own right up ter ther truth over here, an' if ye think that I am lyin' ter ye, jest

come wi' me up ter th' cabin, an' I kin prove it to ye."

"Ha, ha, ha! do you see anything green in our eyes, old man?" the leader demanded. "You must think that we are soft. You jest drop that rifle, now, an' then we will take ye over to th' camp, an' ye kin face th' man inter it."

"Not by a good deal I won't," Old Riddles stoutly declared.

"How are ye goin' ter help yerself?"

"By stayin' right where I am."

"Then you will stay a dead man, fer we mean ter take ye or kill ye, an' I don't know but it would be th' best thing that we could do if we plugged ye."

Miss Devere had not ventured to speak, but stood looking on in affright.

The old ranger knew that he was in something of a bad fix. He was trying to gain all the time he could, hoping that something would turn up in his favor.

"I can't see what ye would want ter do that fur," he observed, in response to the last speech of the outlaws, "fer I am one of th' most peaceable old men that ye ever see in yer life. Some o' ye has been poppin' away at me fer the last day or two, an' I have been wonderin' what it was fur. Ye have got about all th' worldly goods that my party an' friends had, an' why don't ye let that settle it, an' take yerselves off?"

"That ain't accordin' ter th' programme. We are goin' ter have th' gals, an' we are goin' ter have them hosses back that you was so smart in takin' th' other night. You no doubt thought that was a mighty smart trick, too, but you will find out that it wasn't anything o' th' kind. Come, now, up with them hands, or we will drop ye. No more foolin' about it."

"Then ye really 'sist upon it, do ye?"

"Yes, we do."

"An' what about th' gal?"

"She kin do ther same."

"We'll have ter do it, gal," the old man had to acknowledge, "fer it ain't by any means pleasant ter be cut off in th' youth an' beauty o' life by a pesky bullet, I should say. Put up yer hands jest as ye see me do, an' don't make no fuss. It will be th' wuss fur us if we do."

Even yet the old man hoped by this manner to gain a moment's advantage, in order to use his rifle, but the outlaws were watching him too closely, so all he could do was to obey their order.

He allowed his rifle to drop gently against the rock, and held his hands up, the young lady, badly frightened, holding hers up in like manner.

"Thar, there is some sense in that," observed the spokesman of the three, "an' now ye want ter stand right still while we tie ye up."

The place where they were standing was at the point where the little valley made a turn, and the cabin was just out of sight one way, while they were not far enough around to see what was going on in the other direction.

This did not trouble the old ranger much, however, for he was not looking so much for help from others as he was for a good chance to help himself.

One of the rascals laid down his rifle, and stepping forward, began to tie the old man's hands together. That done, he next secured his arms at his sides. They were not going to take any chances of his getting away.

As soon as Old Riddles was thus secured, the man turned his attention to the young lady and tied her in very much the same manner, having first thrust a gag into her mouth to keep her from screaming.

Only a very few moments had elapsed since the first appearance of the three men, and there were no signs of any one coming to the rescue.

"Thar, now we have got ye safe," the leader of the outlaws commented, "an' we will be goin'. Come right along, old man, an' you too, gal, or it will be th' wuss fer th' both of ye. We have got hosses not a great ways off down th' valley heur."

Two of the men led the ranger, while the other gave his attention to the girl, and in this manner they started, one of the men carrying Old Zeb's rifle, and the dog following after them.

It was quite a little walk to the place where the horses were, but they lost no time in getting there, and it was then found that they had six of the faithful animals with them. They had evidently counted upon even a larger haul than they had made.

The young lady was helped to mount, and the same attention was shown to the old ranger.

"Kin you ride well?" Old Riddles asked, turning to the girl.

She nodded that she could.

"That is good, but ye want ter hold fast fer all ye are wu'th. That animile looks ter me ter be considerable skittish. Mebbly these gentlemen will onloose yer hands fer ye, if ye will promise not ter bolt."

"What is that you are talkin' about?" one of the men demanded.

"I was sayin' ter th' girl that mebbly if she wouldn't run off you would loose her hands so

as she could hold on a leetle better. Ye see she is so narvous that she is jest as likely ter fall off as not."

"Yes, we will do that, if she will not try any funny work," the leader of the three agreed. "Will ye promise, miss?"

"In course she will," exclaimed the old ranger. "She has got better sense than not ter do it."

"You shut up your head, old fool, and keep it shut. I am talkin' to th' lady herself. What d'ye say, miss?"

Olivia nodded that she would not try to escape.

The old ranger's coolness and courage gave her fresh confidence, and she had high hopes that it would not turn out so bad as the men had threatened.

The cords were soon cut and her hands freed, and she took a firm hold upon the rein.

"Hold fast fer all you are wu'th," the old man again cautioned, "fer ding bast my old hat if that hoss don't look as though he was ready ter jump most out o' his own skin. Ya-a-ah! git! ye brute, you! git!"

It was all done so quickly that the outlaws could hardly realize what had happened.

The horse the girl was on was headed up the valley, and the old ranger had leaned over toward her while talking, and giving the animal a sudden kick he gave a scream that was enough to frighten it half to death.

With a wild snort of terror the horse sprung away, almost throwing the girl from its back, but thanks to the warning she had received she was able to hold fast, and away she went like the very wind.

Such a trick as this was partly looked for, but it was thought that it would be the old man who would try to get away, and therefore one of the men was holding fast to the bridle of his horse.

That animal did try to break away when Old Zeb shouted, but the man held fast and kept it from doing so.

By the time they had got over their first surprise, and thought of giving chase, the young lady was fifty yards away, and in a moment more would be out in plain sight of the cabin.

"Curse you!" the leader cried, "what did you do that for?"

"Just fur fun," Old Riddles coolly replied.

"Well, then, take *that* jest fer fun, too," and with the words the man dealt the ranger a blow upon the head with his rifle that almost tumbled him from the saddle.

"Shall I go fer her?" asked one who had sprung to his saddle.

"No, curse th' luck, it ain't no use, fer she is on about th' best hoss of th' lot. She'd be at th' cabin afore ye could git half way to her."

"Shall I try a shot at th' hoss, then?" asked the other.

"No, that won't do nuther, fer ye might hit th' gal, an' then there would be th' deuce ter pay fer sure."

"Then th' next best thing that we kin do is ter riddle this old fool wi' bullets."

"No, we will go on with him ter th' camp, an' then he kin make up his mind that he will git all he wants, an' more too. He will be sorry that he ever tried on any such a trick, that I'll bet on. If he ain't burnt at th' stake fer a fact, then it won't be 'cause I don't try ter have it so. Come, git up onter yer hosses, fer no doubt th' rest of 'em will soon be after us."

With this order the enraged men sprung to their saddles and dashed away down the valley, bearing with them the old ranger, now half-unconscious from the blow he received, a helpless prisoner.

CHAPTER XXIX.

DARK CLOUDS APPEARING.

THE conversation within the old cabin had long since come to an end, and all there were outside, wondering where Old Riddles and Miss DeVere could be.

Of a sudden a most startling scene burst upon their sight.

Around the bend in the valley, and tearing down toward the cabin at a terrific pace, came a horse, and its rider was a woman.

Who could it be?

They were not long in doubt, for the horse was soon near enough for them to recognize Miss DeVere.

"Why," cried Kingsley, "it is Miss DeVere, and she is bound, is she not? I believe she has a gag in her month. Yes, she has; what in the world can have happened? Have they killed Old Riddles?"

Instantly the whole party was thrown into a state of the wildest excitement. Sniffin and Duff managed to get a position near the cabin door as quickly as possible, in order to arm themselves without any delay, if necessary, as they afterward explained; while the others stepped forward anxiously to meet the fugitive, if such she proved to be.

In a moment more the young lady dashed up, and being quite a horsewoman, drew rein and brought her horse to a stop without difficulty.

Kingsley helped her to dismount, and then quickly removed the gag from her pretty mouth.

"What in the name of goodness has happened?" he demanded.

"Oh! a terrible thing has happened!" the frightened and excited young lady exclaimed. "Mr. Riddles has been captured and carried away by the outlaws, and they have threatened to do something horrible to him as soon as they get him to their camp."

"What! can this be true?" cried Woodland. "The old man a prisoner?" doubted Kendrick.

Thus the cries went, all around, every one having something to exclaim.

"Did they have you, too?" asked Mrs. Woodland.

"Yes, to be sure."

"And how did you get away?"

"Through the strategy of the old man. He warned me to hold fast, and then the first thing I knew he gave my horse a kick and away it flew like the very wind."

A few questions put by Kingsley brought out the whole story, and it was then all understood as well as though they had been there to see it for themselves, almost.

"What is to be done?" inquired Mr. Woodland.

"That is just what I am thinking about," answered Kingsley. "What is to be done, sure enough. We must do something, and that with as little delay as possible. I wish you would give me your ideas about the situation."

This was soon done, and Kingsley took in everything that was said.

"Your idea, Miss Drayton," he observed, when all had had their say, "is a good one. I like it. It is about the only one that seems to promise success. I will be the one to undertake the work."

"But, think of the danger you will run."

"Never mind about that; think of the danger that old man is in. It would not do, as you say, for all the men of our party to leave the cabin, for this may perhaps be only a ruse to throw us off our guard and to lead us out where the outlaws can get at us. No, the cabin must be held, and enough men must stay here to protect it. I will set out at once for the outlaw camp."

"Perhaps they will capture you, too," objected Miss Flint.

"If they do they do, and that is all," said the young man; "I shall go, and there is an end of it. Mr. Woodland, you must take charge here, and protect yourself and the ladies at any cost. If any of the men will not obey you, shoot him on the spot without compunction. He will be better as a dead man than he would be if alive and not willing to obey orders."

"That is rather harsh measures, Kingsley," Woodland returned, "but if it is necessary I shall not hesitate to go the full length of martial law with them."

This was said for the especial benefit of Sniffin and Duff.

It may seem a little strange at first thought that Kingsley should take the power out of the hands of his own men—that is, Priestly and Kendrick, and give it to Woodland; but it must be remembered that he had had his suspicions aroused in regard to their fidelity to his cause, and hardly trusted them as he had done before. In order to make it appear all right, however, he said:

"I have chosen you, Woodland, because you have the most at stake here, in the persons of the ladies of your party, and because you have commanded men before. This does not necessarily reflect discredit upon you, Major Kendrick, but takes a great weight of the responsibility off your shoulders."

While talking thus, Kingsley had already mounted the horse that had so recently carried Miss DeVere out of danger, and was all ready to set out.

"When shall we look for your return?" Priestly asked.

"It is impossible for me to give you any idea," was the answer. "I shall have to be guided entirely by circumstances, and it is not at all unlikely that I will get into trouble myself. If I do, of course my non-return will make you aware of it, and you will take steps to protect yourselves and get away when opportunity offers. Now I am off."

As he concluded, the young man dug his heels into the horse's sides, and the animal dashed away.

Barely had he started, however, when he was seen to draw rein and stop. Then he trotted back to the cabin.

"One thing I forgot," he said, "and that is that I am carrying the secret of the hidden treasure into the camp of the enemy. That will never do. Here, Miss Drayton, I trust these papers to you."

Taking the copper envelope from his pocket as he spoke, he gave it into the keeping of the rightful owner of the treasure, and lifting his hat to her, started again, and this time he did not come back, but soon passed out of sight.

Woodland took hold of the reins at the cabin at once, and with a firm hand. He first of all saw to it that their stock of horses was cared for, and that they were securely fastened behind the cabin. Then he made everything

secure around the cabin, and took every precaution for safety that he possibly could take.

In the mean time what of Old Riddles?

It was some time before the old man recovered from the effects of the blow he had received, and when he did he was far along on the trail to the outlaw camp.

Up to this time he had had little to say.

The pain of his hurt now leaving him, he brightened up.

"Wal, critters," he observed, "where are ye headin' fur, anyhow?"

"We are goin' ter th' camp o' Captain Red-hand, if it is any satisfaction to ye ter know," was the explanation.

"How much funder is th' distance?"

"About another hour's ride."

"Thank ye fer th' information. You seem like putty civil sort o' fellers. I suppose ye know what that p'izen captain o' yours is up to in this part o' th' kentry, don't ye?"

"Mebby we do an' mebbly we don't. It ain't fer us ter have anything ter say about his affairs, whether we know about 'em or not."

"It seems that he has got ye purty well under his thumb, then, an' ye daresn't talk like free men."

The old man's object is clear. He wanted to set them against their captain, and then try to win their confidence. He did not relish the idea of being taken into their camp, but there seemed little prospect of his escaping that fate.

The leader of the three men was not slow to understand him.

"I see through yer game," he declared, "an' it ain't no use fer ye ter try on any sich business with us. We have got ye, an' to th' captain ye have got ter go. Ye don't want ter think that ye kin win us over ter your side, fer it can't be did."

"Beg yer pardon," the old man apologized, "but I hadn't no sich idee in mind, if I don't lie. I don't mind tellin' ye, though, that if ye was ter take me right back ter th' place where ye found me, an' leave me there, ye wouldn't lose nothin' by th' operation."

"Ha, ha, ha! you must think that we are crazy, don't you? You jest rest easy, old feller, an' make all yer little bargains with th' captain when ye see him. I reckon that he will make one bargain fer ye that will settle ye, an' that will knock all th' rest of yer bargains inter a cocked hat."

"Very well," said the old ranger, with feigned cheerfulness, "sich is th' fortunes o' war, an' I ain't kickin' 'cause your end o' th' beam is up an' my end is down. I have an idee that there will be another teeter o' th' thing afore long, howsumever, an' then mebbly it will be th' other way."

So they talked on, but try as he would, the old man could not gain anything that was of any value to him, that is—in the way of a plan of escape. He would have to wait and trust to luck.

In due season the outlaw camp was reached, and the men rode right up to the tent of Captain Red-hand, dismounted, led their prisoner up to the door of the tent, announced their presence, and were told to enter.

In they filed, the old man in their midst.

Captain Red-hand was seated in the center of his tent, on a pretty little camp-chair that had recently been the property of the Woodlands, and all around him was scattered much of the other property that had been taken from them. The man was masked, and his belt was full of weapons.

"Well, what have you there?" he demanded.

"This is th' old feller that has been in charge o' th' party over in th' other valley," was the reply.

"Oh, it is, eh? Well, old man, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"It is a fine day," observed the old ranger in the most matter-of-fact sort of way.

"Oh, hang the weather, we know all about that; what I want to know is, what do you mean to do with that party that you have got with you over in the other valley?"

"Wal, I reckon I'll let 'em take keer o' themselves fer a little while," was the reply.

"Yes, I guess you will too. Are you the man that is called Old Riddles?"

"That is what I am called sometimes."

"You are the old rooster that burned one of my men at the stake, then. I am glad to get hold of you, and I shall serve you in the same manner at sunrise to-morrow morning."

"There wasn't no burnin' about it," the old man hotly declared. "Th' p'izen critter was put to th' stake, ter frighten him inter tellin' what he knowed, but he was nct burned wu'th a cent. He was shot by that p'izen critter of a Terrill, an'—"

"There, that will do, for such tales won't go down here. I have tried to put you out of my path by shooting, but my men made a failure of every time. I guess it would have been all up with you this time, though, if I had not told them to bring you alive if they could. When any man takes it upon himself to burn one of Captain Red-hand's men at the stake, he can make up his mind that that is just the fate that is in store for him. Now there is only one condition on which I will let you live."

CHAPTER XXX.

PLOTS AND PLANS.

HERE was a surprise for the old ranger.

What could be the condition on which his life was to be spared?

It would not take him long to find out, if questioning would bring the desired result.

"What is that condition?" he inquired.

"Before I tell you that," was the answer, "you want to fix it in your mind that I have decided that you shall burn at the stake. This will give you a better idea of the advantage of the chance I am about to give you."

"All right, that is understood, so don't let yer nat'ral bashfulness stand in th' way o' lettin' out th' hull truth. I reckon I kin stand it if you kin. What is th' chance?"

"I see you are disposed to listen to reason, old man."

"You kin bet I am, every time."

"Well, the chance that I shall give you is this: One of our men has made a great discovery that there is a big treasure hid here in this region somewhere, and we are after it."

"That is a big thing," observed the old man, carelessly.

"You are right it is. Now, if you will join us, let your party get out of here as best they can, and help us find this treasure, we will not only set you free when the work is done, but we will give you a share of whatever we find. How does this hit you?"

We forgot to mention that, before beginning this conversation, the outlaw chief had sent his men from the tent, and that now he and the old ranger were alone together.

"It don't hit me a tall," was Old Zeb's reply. "In th' fu'st place, I don't take much stock in all these stories about hidden treasures, an' it is mighty sartain that I take a good deal less stock in your word. As fer desertin' th' party that I have 'greed ter pilot into th' hills an' out ag'in, that can't be did. Old Zeb Horn ain't that kind o' man, nary time. An' as ter j'inin' ye, I wouldn't do it if I was ter burn at th' stake in an hour. You are a p'izen lot o' critters, an' sooner or later ye are bound ter be hanged. Oh, no; not any fer Old Zeb, if you please!"

"That settles the whole thing, then. You have had a fair offer, and you have refused it. Now it is your own fault that you have got to die."

"Better an honest man dead than a traitor alive."

"You may change your mind about that yet. Ho, men! come in and get your prisoner."

In a few moments the men were at hand, and the captain said:

"Here, men, take this old fool away, and see that he is bound up so that there will be no possible chance of his getting away. Put him where you will know that he is safe. If he gets away, it will be death to every one of you. Then set to work and put up a torture-stake, and at sunrise we will roast him the same as he did poor Burke. You see, old man," turning again to Old Riddles, "there is no earthly show for you, so I was not afraid to tell you what I did."

Old Riddles was not by any means a fool, and he saw plainly how things were working in the outlaw camp. It was plain that the matter of the hidden treasure was known only to the captain and Terrill, while the men were being kept in ignorance concerning it. In telling him about it, the captain believed that he was perfectly safe, because he certainly meant to put him out of the way. This the old man readily understood, and he was tempted to let the whole thing out before the men; but on second thought he saw it would be better for his own friends as it was.

"That is all right," he replied to what the captain had said. "I kin see inter yer leetle game, an' without any spectacles on, either."

The captain said no more, but waved him away, and the men dragged him out of the tent in no gentle manner.

He was conducted to another and smaller tent some distance on, and there he was bound up in such a way that he saw it would be useless for him to try to escape without help.

"There you are, old man," observed his captors, when they had done their work to their satisfaction, "and we would like to see you get clear."

They went off and left him, the leader returning to the tent of the captain.

"Well," he notified, "I guess he is not likely to get away, captain. We have done him up so that there is no possible show for him to get loose."

"That is all right, for I can trust you for that. Now, what did you learn while on your trip?"

"Wal, no very great sight, I am afeerd. We sartainly didn't see anything of any one that we could think was th' traitor that Terrill told you about."

"No, I suppose not; but did you see any of the girls? The more I think about them, the more I want them. I am sorry I didn't take them when I had the chance."

"Yes, we see one of 'em, captain, an' we had her on a hoss, all secure ter fetch along with us, but hang me if that old man didn't give th' hoss

a kick, which no one would 'a' thought of, an' away th' hoss went, right up to th' cabin, with th' gal on his back. I would have shot th' old skunk right thar an' then if it hadn't been against your orders."

Captain Red-hand was in a terrible rage, and cursed in a horrible manner, but that did not seem to frighten his man in the least.

"She got away, slick an' clean, an' that is all there is about it," he observed.

"Well, I suppose you could not help it, but it is enough to make a man swear. Go and send Terrill to me, and then set to work at that stake. It will be sweet revenge to see the old fellow roasting."

"Ha, ha, ha! you bet it will; and I'll see to it that he has a hot-enough fire to cook him done."

With this the man went out, and in a short time the deserter and traitor from the Woodland party came in.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"We have got hold of that Old Riddles."

"So the men tell me."

"And only for him we might have had one of the girls, too. He cheated us out of that, but he shall pay for it. He shall burn at the stake at sunrise."

"The same as Burke did, eh?" laughed Terrill.

"Exactly."

"Well, did the men learn anything?"

"No, not a thing. They could see nothing of the mysterious party who is working against us, and the only result of the trip was the capture of the old ranger."

"Well, it is pretty certain that the mysterious person is not a traitor in this camp, for we have made every effort to find him out, if so, and there is not a shade of suspicion against any one."

"That is true."

"Well, what does the old ranger say about joining us?"

"Just what we thought he would say. He won't have anything to do with us. It is no use to look to him for any help in finding the treasure. We shall have to go it alone on that score."

"Well, perhaps it will be just as well, for we could never trust the old fellow, even if he did promise. Still, it would not be bad to have such a guide, even if we had to keep him under cover of a rifle all the time."

"That is not to be thought of now, however, for he gave me the flat refusal. The terror of death at the stake did not seem to have any effect on him at all. And, by the way, they know well enough at the cabin the part you have played in their misfortunes of late, and it will be safe for you to keep as far away from there as you can."

"Then Burke must have got in his work on me before I got in mine on him. It makes but little difference, however, for the whole truth would have come out sooner or later. It will make no difference to us when we get hold of those pretty young ladies whether they know our secrets or not. That will not help their case any."

"No, I should say it would not."

"By the way, what are your plans of action now? When will you go for the people at the cabin?"

"My first plan is to have some fun with that old man to-morrow morning."

"Then you really mean to burn him?"

"Certainly. He has got to die, and it don't make much difference how we put him off, that I can see. It will give the boys a little fun, and that is all we live for in these days."

Such heartless remarks seem almost impossible, but the criminal records show that human beings become so hardened in crime that they have no feeling for their victims whatever.

"I have nothing to do with that, and no interest in it," declared Terrill. "I should think it would be bad enough to shout him. But, you can do as you please. It is no funeral of mine."

"You always were a little too weak for this sort of life," remarked the captain, "and you always will be. You would never make a captain to rule over such a band of pretty gentlemen as these I control."

"No, perhaps not; but I am not very anxious for the honor. All that I am interested in now is that pretty girl over there at the cabin, and I would like to know when you intend to get her for me. I have done my part of the work, and now I expect my pay. It puzzles me to know what you could have been thinking about not to make sure of them when you had the whole thing all in your own hands."

"That is a mystery to me, too, Terrill, but it cannot be helped now, and we must make the best of it as it is. I think I will go for the cabin to-morrow night, and you can bet that I won't come away without getting what I go for."

"Well, I hope not, certainly; but, see here: have you taken any thought of what the result has been when that young lady has dashed back to the cabin from the place where she got away from our men, and told her story?"

"Yes, I have thought of it a little, but I have not given it much attention. All she can tell is

that the old man was carried off by three men, and what can they do about it?"

"Well, if I am not very much mistaken, some of them will set out on the trail to rescue him."

"Ha, ha, ha! that would be a healthy thing for them to do, if they come this way. We could do the whole lot of them up so quick that they would not know what had hurt them. They will not want to come any further when they get one sight of our force, I am thinking. But, if you think they will be likely to do that, would this not be a good time for us to send some men up around there to keep an eye out for the girls?"

"It certainly would. Can't you send about five of them?"

"Yes, I can and will, and then if they don't accomplish anything, I will go up there to-morrow with the whole force and lay siege to their fort. Oh, we are bound to win; they can't keep us out of it."

So they plotted and planned, and it was certain that there was trouble brewing for one or the other of the rival parties.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

WHEN Philip Kingsley set out from the old cabin on the trail of those who had been so successful in their attack upon the old ranger, he urged his horse to its best speed.

If he could have overtaken the outlaws, it is pretty certain that he would have rushed upon them single-handed, and perhaps would have paid for the rashness with his life.

But there was no chance of his overtaking them now. They had had too great a start, and they were not losing any time, suspecting as they did that some of those at the old cabin would certainly set out after them.

He was not long in finding the trail, for it was broad enough by this time, owing to the many horses that had passed over it of late, and he pressed right on, determined to follow to the end, no matter what came of it.

He well knew, however, that unless he could overtake the rascals before they arrived at their camp, he would stand no chance whatever of being able to rescue the old man without help.

One thing that caused him not a little uneasiness, was the thought that at any moment he might get a bullet in his body from some person in ambush.

This was certainly not a pleasant reflection, but Kingsley was no coward, and casting aside as much as possible the thoughts of his own danger, he looked to the danger of his old friend.

Once when he was at the summit of a hill over which the trail led, he saw the fugitives about a mile away ahead of him, and saw that they were pressing right on toward their destination at as rapid a pace as they could keep up.

"It is no use my trying to overtake them," he thought, "so I may as well take it a little easy. I will push on to their camp, however, and there I will hang around and watch my chance to get in a stroke of work. By the way, this is a rattling good little horse, and I hope it is not one that belongs to the Woodland party. If it is not, I think that I shall claim ownership to it."

As he made these reflections the young man reduced his speed, and proceeded at a slower pace the rest of his journey.

When he came near to the camp of the outlaws he left the trail and moved away through the bushes to the west for some distance, until he came to a place that commanded a good view of the camp, and there he stopped and dismounted.

Fastening his horse to a tree, he passed along to the edge of the undergrowth, and there took up his position to watch the camp.

Two hours passed away.

By this time the afternoon was on the wane, and nothing of importance had he been able to learn. He had found out where his old friend was confined, however, and that was no small matter.

Once he was startled to hear his horse give a loud whinny, and thought that he would surely be discovered, but those who were loafing around the camp did not pay any attention to it, evidently thinking that it was one of their own animals. It was a warning to the young man however, and he lost no time in moving the horse to a place some distance further away.

That being done, he returned and resumed his watch.

The place where he was hiding was directly under the ledge of a great, overhanging rock, the side of which was as perpendicular and smooth as the side of a house, and it was very much higher than the average house.

While he lay there, Kingsley fancied that he heard a slight noise over his head and looking up, was surprised to see a small stone coming slowly down the face of the rock, evidently being lowered by a string.

"Well, by Jupiter," he exclaimed, "here is more mystery. What can be the meaning of this? Is some person trying to lower a commu-

nication to me? Impossible, for how can any one know that I am here?"

Down came the stone, none the less, and as it came nearer the young man saw that there was indeed a piece of paper attached to it.

Down, down, down, it came, slowly but not quite silently, for it clinked against the face of the rock every moment, making the slight noise that had at first attracted Kingsley's attention to it.

Creeping out a little way, Kingsley looked up in the hope of seeing who it was that had hold of the string, but he was unable to do so. Whoever it was, the person was entirely out of sight.

Then came the sudden thought to the young man that perhaps it was done by an enemy to draw him out where a shot could be had at him.

As soon as this popped into his mind he wisely withdrew out of sight again, though he did not think that was likely to be the explanation of it, since now he already exposed himself.

However, the mystery was soon to be made known, for now the stone was nearly within his reach.

Down it came, and in a moment more Kingsley held it in his hand.

The stone was a ragged one, weighing about a pound, and around it was a sheet of paper carefully tied in place by the string, and on the outside of it it read:

"When you get this, give three slight jerks.
"FRIEND."

Kingsley immediately complied.

Immediately the string was slackened and the stone fell into his hands, and he sat down to examine it further.

Carefully he untied the string that held the paper around it, and then as carefully removed the paper and spread it out to read it.

It was written in pencil, and ran as follows:

"FRIEND:—
"You are in a position where you need help, and I am ready to lend it. Your friend the old ranger is in the hands of the outlaws and you desire to rescue him. You can do nothing until late to night. Then he must be got away or not at all. It is intended to barn him at the stake at sunrise. If you will trust me, and will remain where you are, I will send a helper to you as soon as it is dark. Answer this and let me know what you will do. I send pencil herewith, thinking you may not have one. Give three jerks on the string when you are ready for me to pull up."
"SPIRIT."

"Hello!" Kingsley exclaimed in thought, "it is our mysterious friend again. I would like to know who and what this person is. What shall I say to him—or her?"

Taking the pencil, for he had none of his own, he spread the paper out and wrote:

"MYSTERIOUS FRIEND:—
"I have now known enough of you to know that you are to be trusted. I will remain here and will wait for the person whom you will send. He—or she—must have a password. What shall it be? Shall that person act under my direction? or I under his? Give full directions."
"TENDERFOOT."

When this was written, and the paper had again been attached to the string, he gave the three jerks as requested, and at once the stone began to climb up the face of the cliff.

Here was a turn in the case that was entirely unlooked for.

It was a wonder to Kingsley who this mysterious personage could be, as indeed it had been a matter of wonder to all of them.

He watched the stone as it ascended the rock, and when it came to the top it disappeared without the sign of any human hand to assist it. There was nothing strange about this, however, for he saw that it was easy enough for the stone to be lifted over the top by the string.

For some little time nothing more was seen of it, and all was silence. At last it came in sight again, however, and slowly came down the face of the rock as before.

It was with not a little impatience that the young man waited for it to come down where he could reach it, for he was more than anxious to learn what his mysterious friend would have to say.

Down and down the stone made its way, and in due time it was at hand.

Kingsley grasped it eagerly, gave the signal that he had received it, and in haste removed the paper and read it.

It ran thus:

"FRIEND:—
"I will send a helper to you as soon as it is dark. He will come with the password 'A friend in need.' You may trust him fully. Place yourself under his directions, and be guided by him. I will have given him instructions. With his help I think you will be able to rescue your old friend without trouble. As soon as he is free you must hasten to the cabin, for I think you will be needed there. Do not detain my man after he has done his work."
"MOUNTAIN SPIRIT."

Kingsley read this with a good deal of silent satisfaction.

It was only too plain that he and his party had friends in the hills, and friends who were indeed proving themselves friends in need.

It would have been a great satisfaction to him if he could have known who and what they were, but as that was not to be, at least not at present, he had to be content with what he was permitted to know concerning them.

When he had read the note over again, to make sure of every word of it, he took the pencil and wrote his reply.

What he said was this:

"It shall be as you say. I will remain right here, and will answer the password of your man with the words 'Is a friend indeed.' I will place myself under his guidance, and will trust him. He shall not be detained after the work is done. I hope to be permitted to know you ere long, in order to thank you for your interest in me and my party."
"GRATEFUL TENDERFOOT."

When he had done he tied the paper carefully to the stone, gave the three slight jerks as agreed upon, and at once the person at the top of the cliff drew it up.

Only a short distance away were several men of the outlaw band, but they were entirely unaware that anything of the kind was going on near them.

When the stone reached the top of the rock it disappeared as before, and nothing more was seen of it.

After it was all over, Kingsley could hardly believe that it was true. Had it really taken place? or had he been asleep and dreaming?

Had it not been that he had kept one of the pieces of paper, this question might have grown to a serious doubt in his mind, for it was a sleepy place, and more than once since he had come there he had found himself nodding.

There was the note, however, and there could be no doubt about it.

As stated, he had learned where the old ranger was confined, and that was a matter of no little importance. Napoleon, the old man's faithful dog, was lying in front of one of the tents, and it needed no further indication to show where Old Riddles was.

The afternoon passed, and as night came on Kingsley felt decidedly hungry. He thought there was no possible chance for him to get anything to eat, however, so he had to bear it as well as he could.

By his own efforts there certainly was little prospect of his getting anything, but while he was thinking about it something came down the cliff, and on taking it up he found it to be a piece of broiled bear-meat.

His unknown friend had not only offered help in one way, but now had come forward with help of another sort.

"Whoever it is," the young man thought, "I must ever feel grateful for the favors I have received."

By the time he had eat the meat it was growing dark, and he looked to the weapons preparatory for the work before him.

While he was thus engaged, he noticed that some of the outlaws were getting out their horses preparatory to setting out upon some expedition or other, and while he watched them he saw Captain Red-hand come out and give them orders. When this was done, the men, five in number, rode out of the camp.

CHAPTER XXXII.

INDIAN WARFARE.

"THERE is mischief of some sort afoot," Kingsley thought, "and ten to one those fellows are bound for the cabin. I hope Woodland and the others are on the lookout for them, and that they will get a warm reception."

He guessed aright, for that was just the intention with which the rascals had gone forth.

The afternoon faded away, twilight came on, and night was soon at hand.

Kingsley thought of his horse, then, and stole out to see how it was coming on. He had left it in a place where it could feed a little, but knew that now it would be likely to answer any whinny that it might hear from the camp, and in that there was danger of discovery.

When he came to the place where he had left the animal he found it still there, but to his surprise found that the halter had been hitched around its nose in a half-turn so that the animal would have found it impossible to make much of a noise even if it had felt inclined to do so.

Here was proof that his friends were not as forgetful or careless as he himself had been.

Patting the beast on its neck, and whispering a few words to it, he retraced his steps to his hiding-place under the cliff.

When he arrived there he was in a measure startled to hear a deep-voiced and guttural "Ugh!"

He stopped short and looked around, and in the dim light presently made out the form of a man.

"Who is there?" Kingsley demanded, in a not-too-loud voice.

"A friend in need," was the response, in the same deep tone.

"A friend in need is a friend indeed," rejoined Kingsley, as he stepped forward and held out his hand.

The man took a step forward and extended his, and the two shook hands in a decidedly friendly manner.

What surprised Kingsley then was to find that the stranger was an Indian, one of full blood, decked out in all the peculiar array of feathers and paint to which Indians are given.

This was a surprise indeed.

When he came to recall the arrow that had been fired at the cabin with such directness and force, however, he wondered why the thought had not come to him before that it must be an Indian that had fired it.

"What is your name?" he inquired.

"Me name Still Foot," was the reply. And then came the counter-question: "Who you name?"

"My name is Philip Kingsley," was the explanation.

"Good," said the Indian; "now set down have some talk."

"I am with you," returned Kingsley, as he followed the example of his strange friend and sat down on the ground.

"You got gun?" was Still Foot's next question.

"Yes," Kingsley replied, "I am well-armed, having a rifle and a pair of revolvers."

"Good. Me got gun, too. Maybe want use it; maybe not. Got him all same."

"Yes, it is well enough to have them," Kingsley agreed.

The Indian grunted.

"Me chief," he presently observed; "you do what me say."

This was evidently said to settle that question before they went any further, and was something the Indian had no doubt been instructed to say.

"Yes, that is all understood," Kingsley responded. "You are to have full say in the matter, and I am under your orders."

"Good. Now me tell what do. Got wait till camp 'sleep. Then me go in 'lone, set old man free. You wait right here. Old man come out, then both wait here till me come. Me come soon. Then me know what do, and maybe steal horses and big stake grub. How like that?"

"That will be a big thing if it can only be done," answered the young man. "I have my doubts about our being able to do it, however. If you can help me to get the old man out of their hands, and safely away from here I shall be satisfied."

"Me do that easy. Want do more."

"You seem to be a good fellow, Still Foot, and I like you already. Now I am of the opinion that you are not to say anything about your own affairs, are you?"

"What mean?" was the brief query.

"I mean to say that I suppose that you will not tell me anything about yourself and your master, so it will be useless for me to ask questions."

"Me told say nothing. Me keep still tongue. Talk only business."

"That is what I was coming at; and such being the case, I will not ask anything out of the line of business."

"Good."

"By the way, I suppose you are aware that the moon will shine ere many hours, are you not, Still Foot?"

"Yes, me know. Make no difference. Still Foot all the same still in moonlight like still in dark. Know thing or two."

The Indian was so quaint in his speech and manner that Kingsley had to laugh at him.

For some moments both were silent, and then Kingsley thought of something and asked:

"By the way, Still Foot, was it you that tied the nose of my horse?"

"Yes," was the reply. "Horse make noise, be find out, do no good. Must be still all time."

"Is that a hint that I had better be still now?"

"Got no more say; better do no talk," was the quaint but sensible reply.

This cut short their conversation, and no more was said. The Indian sat as still and motionless as though made of stone, and two hours dragged by.

To Kingsley it was a weary watch, for he was very sleepy, but he managed to keep awake.

The moon came up, and in a little while the whole valley was lighted up with her mellow light.

At the end of the two hours not a soul was stirring in the camp, with the exception of two guardsmen who were pacing to and fro at each end, some distance away from the tents.

They walked silently back and forth across the valley, too far apart to converse without shouting.

The Indian now stood up and took a survey of the field of action.

"Ugh!" he presently grunted, "bad."

"What is bad?" Kingsley inquired.

"Dog. He bark, wake whole camp up. Have kill him."

The dog referred to was the old ranger's dog, Napoleon.

"You must not kill that dog, whatever you do," Kingsley warned. "It belongs to the old man, and he would not part with it for a fortune."

"Bad," the Indian repeated, "bad."

"But you must not kill it. The old man would never forgive you."

The Indian was very thoughtful for some time, and while he was thus silent, the dog was seen to get up and enter the tent where the old man was supposed to be.

"There," observed Kingsley, "the dog has gone into the tent. I have no doubt the old man has called it."

"That is worse," the Indian commented. "Now make noise sure."

It was indeed rather a bad difficulty in the way, but it had to be overcome somehow, and Kingsley again impressed it upon the mind of the Indian that he must not kill the dog under any circumstances.

Presently the Indian got hold of a new idea, and taking up his rifle, he made a motion to Kingsley with his hand and said:

"Come, me see new way."

As silently as shadows they moved away toward the eastern end of the camp, and then on toward the place where one of the guardsmen was walking back and forth across the valley.

When they came to his beat, the man was on the other side of the valley.

"Now," said the Indian, "we stay here. Man come back, me put him sleep. You then step right out take his place. You walk just same he walk. Then me go 'tend to dog and old man."

At first Kingsley was averse to the taking of a life, but when he reflected that the life of a friend was at stake, and perhaps the lives of all his party, he felt that it would be only carrying out the well-known first law of Nature.

The Indian left him and crept down through the bushes to the point where the man would be likely to stop when he came back, and there waited, Kingsley lying down out of sight where he was.

By this time the man was coming back, and it was with a fast-beating heart that Kingsley awaited the tragedy.

When the man came, however, he did not pass near enough to the place where the Indian was for him to carry out his intention.

Seeing this, the Indian did not move, but allowed the man to turn and go back across the valley once more.

If the fellow could have known what a narrow escape he had had, the chances are that he would have kept far away from that side of the valley for the rest of the night. Knowing nothing about it, however, he went on his way in all confidence.

As soon as the man was far enough away to make it safe for him to do so, the Indian crept forward to the place where the guardsman had turned, and once more lay down to wait for his coming.

It was not long to wait. The valley was not very wide at this point, and even though the man walked slowly, he could not consume many minutes in making the trip over and back.

It fairly chilled Kingsley's blood, to see the Indian lying with his knife in hand, and to know that the man was this time walking to his certain death. From where he was he could see the Indian plainly, but from where the outlaw was coming he was hid by some bushes and stones.

On the man came. He reached the end of his beat, stopped, glanced down the valley for a moment, and then turned to start back again.

Just when he was in the act of turning the Indian rose up as silently as a shadow, and when the man's back was fairly toward him, sprung forward, threw one arm around his neck tightly, and with the other drove his knife home.

It was certainly something terrible, but the life of better men depended on it, so it could not be said that it was ruthless killing. It was life against life, and the outlaw was certainly the one deserving the fate.

Without a cry, and almost without a sound, the man fell back into the Indian's arms, dead.

As soon as the deed was done, Kingsley stepped out, and, as it had been arranged, started across the valley in the dead man's stead, leaving the Indian to take care of the rest of the work.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

DESERTION AND ATTACK.

SOME interesting events have in the mean time been taking place at the old cabin, and with the reader's permission we will return there in the present chapter, in order to keep the various parts of our story abreast.

Mr. Woodland had taken hold of the reins, as stated, with a determined hand, and no one seemed to be inclined to dispute his authority.

Everything passed off finely, and when night came on it found the cabin in a state of defense.

Supper had been cooked and eat, the horses had been cared for for the night, though the supply of grass for them was not as abundant as could have been wished, and every thing that could be done to insure the safety of the party, had been done.

As soon as night came on, Woodland stationed his guardsmen for the first watch, and the choice happened to fall to Eugene Priestly and Major Arlington Kendrick.

Those worthy gentlemen armed themselves, and took up their station before the cabin, at a

little distance away, one on one side of the little arm in which the cabin was situated, and one on the other.

The watch was to be changed every hour, since Woodland thought this plan would give no one whatever any chance to fall asleep on duty. If a man could not keep awake one hour, he reasoned, he was not much of a man.

Priestly and the major took their stations, as said, but they were not long apart. As soon as it was thoroughly dark they joined each other, and commenced an earnest conversation.

"The question is, Kendrick, what are we going to do?" said Priestly.

"The best thing that I know of," was the reply, "is to desert, just as we did think of doing, and going it on our own hook. I have roughed it in the mountains in my day, and I have no fear of our not getting along all right."

"When shall we do that?"

"We will never have a better chance than the present."

"Would you go off in this way when we are here on duty and the others are depending on us for their safety?"

"Why not? there is not likely to be any danger for some hours, even if there is any all night; and in an hour they will put on other guardsmen anyhow."

"What will they think of us?"

"They will think that we have been killed, perhaps, but we do not care what they think. They will find out sooner or later the trick that we have played them, but if in the mean time we can get hold of that treasure and get away with it, we will not care what they think."

"Well, now is the time for us to make up our minds what we intend to do about it. It will not do for us to put it off an hour and then think we can carry out the plan as well as we can now."

"That is just what I hold, and that is the reason that I am in for getting out at once. Now we have found the place where the heap of stones is, and if we only had the map in our possession we could find the treasure in no time. Do you think it will be possible for us to get away with the papers that Kingsley gave the young lady when he set out this afternoon?"

"No, sir; that is not to be thought of. We shall have to go it alone, relying upon what we can remember of the directions."

"Which is only a mighty little, so far as I am concerned."

They parted and walked their posts for a little time, in order not to rouse the suspicions of Woodland or any of the others, if they happened to be seen, but they were not long apart.

"Well," demanded Kendrick, when they next met, "what have you made up your mind to do?"

"I have made up my mind to desert," was the decided answer. "That treasure will not do us any good now, since the heir of that man Drayton has come to light, and our only chance is to get the first whack at it and get out of the way as soon as we can. That is what I would call the only sensible thing to do."

"Well, are you all ready to dust?"

"Yes; are you?"

"Yes, I am ready, and as our time is about half up, we had better not delay any longer."

"Come right on, then."

And so the two miserable traitors started, leaving their posts and leaving the cabin exposed to attack without warning. It was certainly a cowardly trick.

They made as good speed as they could in getting out of the valley, and once out, turned away toward the north.

They were taking a desperate step, throwing aside their manhood and running the chances of death, lured on by the lust of gain.

"Where to?" Priestly asked, as they pushed forward.

"We must get to some safe place at a distance from the cabin," was the reply, "and to-morrow, while our party and the outlaws are at war, we will be on the lookout for the treasure."

The hour of their watch came and passed, and nothing was heard from them by those at the cabin.

As it was early, no one had yet retired, and for some time longer Woodland paid no attention to their tardiness, expecting them to come in at any moment.

When the time had grown to be an hour and a half, however, he became active to learn why they did not come in for relief.

"Our guardsmen are evidently not aware that they are overdoing their time," he observed; "I will go and call them in. You and I will then take a turn at it, Mr. Sniffin."

"I am perfectly ready," Sniffin declared.

Going out, Woodland called to the two men on duty, but got no answer.

What could this mean?

"There is something wrong," he declared, "and I must learn what it is."

Taking his rifle, he went out toward the spot where the men had been stationed, and there again called their names.

Still no reply. Surely there had been dark work going on there.

With silent caution he advanced, his rifle ready for instant use, but he came to and passed

the place where the men should have been, and saw no one.

"This beats everything," he thought. "They must have been captured or killed; and yet, I should think one or the other of them could have given the alarm."

He went back to the cabin, and there reported what he had discovered.

As may be imagined, there was great excitement at once.

"I am sorry that I did not take part in the watch myself, as I at first intended to do," Woodland complained. "So early in the evening, however, I did not look for any such thing as this."

"What do you think can have happened them?" Mrs. Woodland asked.

"They have either been killed or captured," was the reply.

"Then," said Miss Drayton, "I should think it would be necessary to post a new watch at once. I am willing to take part in it with the rest of you. I am not by any means a coward, and I can certainly sound an alarm."

"I will not allow anything of the kind," was the decided answer. "You are in the right, however, in saying that we should post a guard immediately. Mr. Duff and Mr. Sniffin, you take your rifles and go out there at once, and I will join you in as few minutes' time as possible. Do not fire a shot this way under any circumstances, and do not allow any person to approach you from the other way until he has made himself known."

"With pleasure I will do as you say," said the brave Sniffin, his hands trembling and his legs almost refusing to hold him. "It is a pleasure to go forth to duty in defense of the ladies. I will lay down my life for them, if it comes to it."

"The same with me," avowed Duff, casting his eyes toward Miss Flint. "My life I count as nothing in their cause."

"That is all right," said Woodland. "But you want to be up and doing, and that at once. Go!"

The two men went with evident reluctance, and then Woodland said:

"Ladies, from some words that I have heard our old guide and Mr. Kingsley let fall, I am of the opinion that those two men have played the part of traitors and have deserted us. What do you think of it?"

"I am of the same opinion," was the answer of Blanche Drayton. "I have heard enough to lead me to suspect them, and I think they have had it in mind for some time. Of course I could say nothing, for I had no proof."

"Certainly not."

"You see, sir, they are after that treasure, and if they can do it they are determined to get to it ahead of Mr. Kingsley. I am sorry if I wrong them, but that is just what I think."

"You have grounds for so thinking. Now, what I was going to say is, if they too have joined the outlaws—"

"I do not think they have," Blanche hastened to say.

"Nor do I; but, at the same time, if they have, they may lead on an attack at once, knowing our weakness. I would trust them no sooner than I would trust Terrill. On the other hand, if they have not deserted us, but have been killed by the outlaws, then we may look for an attack from the latter at any moment. In such an event, I shall have to call upon you ladies to help me defend the cabin. I have little or no confidence in the two men that are left to us, so I want you to load some of these arms for your use, and be ready to do active duty. The safety of our party depends upon its weakest members now."

The ladies were not a little pale and excited, but they took it all with a greater show of calmness than would have been looked for, and set about preparing the weapons at once.

Woodland went out to the place where he had sent Duff and Sniffin, and there joined them.

He sent Duff back to the cabin, telling him that he would call him in an hour to relieve Sniffin, and although Duff murmured against this, and insisted that he wanted to be all the time in active service, and in the midst of danger, he obeyed the order.

The next hour passed without anything of importance occurring.

The moon was now up, and its light made half of the valley as light as day, as it seemed, and as is usually said.

Woodland sent Sniffin in and told him to order out Duff, and that worthy soldier had barely taken his place at the front when he found what he had before wished for.

There came a sudden shot, without any previous warning whatever, and that gentleman's hat was taken off his head by the bullet, and sent flying several yards away.

This was a little too much for his nerves, and with a howl of terror he let fall his rifle and dashed away for the cabin as fast as ever his legs could carry him, uttering a scream of terror at every step.

Woodland sprung forward and grabbed up the rifle, and knowing the uselessness of staying there in the open to meet an unknown number of foes, hastened to get into the friendly

shadow, and joined in after Duff in his race for the cabin, fortunate in escaping every one of the many bullets that came hurtling after him, and in reaching the cabin in safety.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IN A TIGHT PLACE.

JUST as soon as he was safe within the cabin, Woodland proceeded to shut and barricade the door.

The windows had previously been secured, so nothing remained to be looked after but the door.

That was soon made fast, for everything was ready at hand, and not a moment too soon, either, for barely had it been secured when there came a great blow against it, as though it had been struck by a battering-ram.

"Goodness me!" cried Sniffin, "we shall all be murdered alive!"

"Don't trouble your head about that," advised Miss Flint, "but see what you can do toward hindering them from murdering us dead!"

"That is the idea," agreed Barrington Duff, as he stood bravely up in one corner—as far into the corner as he could get; "grasp your weapons and stand ready to defend the ladies, and sell your life as dearly as you can."

At that instant there came another blow at the door, and Duff grasped his rifle still more firmly, at the same time trying to shrink still further into the corner, as though he would have liked to shrink entirely out of sight.

"This will not do," declared Woodland; the door will not stand it. We must give them a taste of what we are made of."

So saying, he stepped forward to one of the loop-holes that he had previously prepared, thrust the muzzle of his rifle through, and fired.

There was no answering cry of pain to show that the shot had taken effect, but in the same instant some heavy body was heard to fall, and it was readily guessed that the men had dropped their weapon of aggression, to place themselves beyond range as hastily as they could.

"That is the way to give it to them," cried Duff; "that is the way to salt 'em down. Show me a hole where I can give them another dose."

"Let me at them, too," demanded Sniffin, as he flourished his weapons, but at the same time keeping behind Woodland. "Don't you think we had better rush out and engage them hand to hand?"

Woodland looked at them both in alarm. The way they handled their weapons showed him that there was almost as much danger from them as there was from the enemy without.

"See here," he said, "I think I will assign you two gentlemen to other duty. I have no doubt but we shall have to fight hand to hand before long, and I think I will reserve you for that. Just lay down your rifles, both of you, and draw your knives. Now, one of you take one corner and one the other, and reserve all your strength for the final struggle. As soon as the door gives way I shall expect you to dash forward like the brave men you are, and slay our enemies right and left."

With looks of decided relief for the present, but with an overshadowing dread of what was to come, the two men obeyed, and Woodland and the others felt more at their ease, now that they had no firearms in their hands.

"Now, ladies," Woodland continued, addressing the women of the party, "I will ask you to take up weapons in the defense of our castle. This duty is nothing as compared with what is reserved for these two brave men, and it will not do to allow them to waste their strength in such trivial work. Each of you take a rifle and stand at one of these holes, taking care not to get your body right in front of it, and be ready to fire when I shall give you the word. Fire where you hear the sound of a voice, and if you can hit a man and bring him down, do so. It is our lives or theirs, and it is not necessary to tell you that you must shoot to kill."

"That we will do, every time," declared Blanche Drayton.

"Yes, indeed," supported Mrs. Woodland.

The other two were in the same way determined, and they showed far more courage and spirit than Sniffin and Duff had shown.

Barely had this change of programme been effected when they were hailed from without:

"Hello, in there," a rough voice called out.

"Well, what can we do for you?" responded Woodland.

"We thinks we have made a mistake somehow, an' have got after th' wrong party. Did we hear wimmen's voices in thar?"

"What if you did, or did not?" Woodland demanded.

"Wal, nothin' much, only if we did, it is plain that we are barkin' up th' wrong tree, fer thar is no wimmen in th' party that we set out ter find."

"Whom did you set out to find, then?"

"We are after a band o' outlaws, an' thought we had 'em run down here. Now if you folks ain't them, ye want ter say so; fer if ye don't we will take it fer granted that ye be them, and there will be a heap o' trouble."

"You are very kind to give up this warning,

I am sure," returned Woodland. "I can assure you that we are not outlaws. We have ladies with us, as you kindly inquire, and it is pretty evident that you have made a mistake."

"Wal, we are sorry fer that, strangers, an' if you will come out we will shake hands an' call it square. I guess there has been no damage done on either side. Come right out an' let's be friends. We are a party o' sheriffs, out after th' outlaws, as I said afore."

"If you are satisfied that you have made a mistake," Woodland then advised, "you had better go right on. It will not pay you to remain around here. We have no intention of coming out, nor have we any desire to have the blood of any of the servants of the law upon our hands."

The man was heard to utter an oath in a low tone.

"That won't do," he said aloud, "we must see an' know fer ourselves that you are what ye claim ter be. We mean honest enough, an' if you do too, you can't refuse ter show yourselves."

"That is just what we do refuse, none the less," was the answer, "so it will do you no good to hang around here. You had better take yourselves off now, before we have any more trouble."

Other voices were heard, all swearing roundly.

Finding that their plan would not work, the rascals dropped the mask, and with horrible oaths rushed upon the door again.

Woodland heard them come, and gave the order to fire as soon as they came to the door.

Crash! came their stick against the door, and then crash sounded the rifles within.

This time there was a groan without that told that at least one of the shots had taken effect.

"That will give you an idea of what you are to expect," Woodland called out, "so if you are at all smart you will get away from here as fast as your legs can carry you."

The answer to this was a volley of shots from those without, and some of the bullets tore right through the door, thus warning the defenders that it would not be well for any of them to stand there.

Others were heard to strike the solid logs, through which they of course could not force their way.

The rifles of those within spoke again, and this was followed by a hasty retreat on the part of the besiegers.

"It is pretty clear that they have enough of it for the time being," Woodland remarked, "and while they are away we will reload our weapons."

This the ladies were already doing, and they were conducting themselves like true and heroic soldiers.

Sniffin and Duff did not altogether like the turn that affairs had taken, for they could see that they were not playing a very active part in the defense, but they tried to show their courage in talk.

"Would not this be a good opportunity for us to rush out and give them a lesson hand to hand?" Sniffin suggested.

"Yes, let us do it," begged Duff. "I think we could make them entirely sick of their undertaking."

"We cannot allow you to risk your lives in that way," Woodland declined. "We shall need your strong arms and courageous spirits when the time for hand to hand work is forced upon us. You see we do not know the strength of the enemy."

"That is quite true," agreed Duff; "but if I was sure there were not over ten of them I would rush out anyhow."

"So would I, if they were an even dozen," added Sniffin.

In spite of their danger, all this boasting was very amusing to the rest of the little party.

During the few minutes rest that was afforded them, they tried to think of some means of routing the enemy, but could not contrive any plan. They heartily wished that Kingsley and the old ranger were there, and it was in no wise pleasant to reflect that perhaps both of them were dead. This thought was especially depressing to Blanche Drayton.

"The one thing I fear is that they will run off our horses," remarked Woodland. "Perhaps they do not know our exact strength, however, and will be a little wary of going too far for the present."

Whatever new plans the outlaws were trying to get up, they were silent for some time.

After a while, however, they were heard from again.

"Say, in there," one of them hailed.

"Well?" Woodland demanded.

"We call upon you to surrender and come out of there at once, or we will fill your den so full of lead that you will all get more than a dose of it."

"You are welcome to try it," Woodland defied.

"Then you won't come out?"

"We will not."

"That settles your doom then. Men, blaze away at them, and kill every one of them."

Instantly a great volley of shots was poured upon the cabin, many of them tearing their way

through the door, but not one of them doing any other damage.

As soon as the firing ceased, Woodland ordered those within to return the compliment, which was done with a will. A rattling discharge followed, and once more there was a groan from some one of the attackers.

This was followed by another run from the field, and again there was a spell of silence.

This time the pause was longer than before.

"What can they be up to this time?" Mrs.

Woodland questioned.

No one could guess.

But they were not much longer to remain in doubt.

Presently the reflection of a bright light was seen, and then came the warning:

"You would not surrender when you had a chance to do so, now we will see how you will like being burned out. We are going to set fire to the cabin, and then we are of the opine that you will come out fast enough."

Woodland groaned in spirit. Here was something he could not defend himself against, and doors seemed certain. As for Sniffin and Duff, they looked as if they would faint, and they had nothing to say about rushing out and engaging in a hand-to-hand fight now.

CHAPTER XXXV.

OUT OF THE TOILS.

As soon as Philip Kingsley started across the valley, in place of the guardsman whom his Indian friend had killed, the Indian crept silently back into the bushes and disappeared.

The interest of our story demands that we now follow him.

As shown, he had had an understanding with Kingsley that he, the latter, was to play the part of guardsman in the stead of the man just killed, in order that the suspicions of the other guardsman would not be aroused.

The two could see each other plainly enough in the moonlight, but they were too far apart to enable the one to discover the change that had taken place.

The Indian crept forward through the bushes and among the rocks and stones, until he came nearly opposite to the center of the camp, and there he lay almost flat down upon his stomach and crept out toward the group of tents.

Kingsley had been watching for him constantly, and finally thought he saw him, but the object he saw moved stealthily, and so little of it could be seen, that he could not be sure about it.

That object was the Indian.

On and on he crept, and presently was right in the center of the outlaw camp, his rifle in hand and his knife in his teeth, both ready for instant use.

He did not go in front of any of the tents, but kept close behind them all, and at length came to the one in which it was supposed that the old ranger was confined.

There he stopped, and remained for some minutes in perfect silence.

He had made scarcely a sound, and it was not likely that any one had seen him, for the whole camp was sleeping, full confidence being placed in the watchers.

As he lay there he heard a voice in the tent. It was the voice of the old ranger, as any one who knew him could have told, and he was talking to his dog.

"Ding bast yer hide an' feathers, Napoleon," he was whispering, "why can't ye take holt o' these yere thongs an' chaw 'em off? If ye will do it, by hokey I'll tell ye riddles fer th' next week ter come without a break. This is what I call most tarnel 'zasperatin', old dog, it is fer a fact. You'll be sorry when ye see me roasin' at th' stake ter-morrer, I should say. Mebby you want a riddle now ter cheer ye up. Why is a condemned man like th' root of another man's tongue? Now chaw on that fer a minute."

The Indian listened to all this, and finding that he was indeed at the right one of the tents, prepared for further action.

"D'ye give it up, old doggy?" the old man asked in whisper; "then I'll have ter tell ye, I s'pose. A condemned man is like th' root of another man's tongue, because he is down in th' mouth. Don't go ter laughin', fer that—Hist! what's that?"

What the old ranger heard was the Indian's knife cutting a slit in the side of the tent, near the place where he was lying.

The Indian was quick to note that he had been heard, and he hastened to whisper:

"Me friend; you no speak. Keep dog still."

Old Riddles could hardly believe that he heard aright. His ears were too experienced to be fooled, however, and he hastened to make sure that Napoleon would not bark.

The Indian was but a moment in cutting the hole in the tent, and then he put in his head and arm, touched the old ranger, and reassured:

"No make bit noise. Me friend. Soon git out."

"All right," the old man whispered in reply. "I trust ye, Injun, though I'll be hanged if I love yer race any th' better. Who be ye?"

"Me name Still Foot. All same still tongue, too. No more talk."

While speaking, the Indian was feeling around to learn where the ranger was bound, and having found out, his keen knife quickly cut the cords and he was free.

"Give me yer flipper," the old man requested, and feeling around, he got hold of one of the Indian's hands and gave it a hearty shaking.

Still Foot did his share of the shaking, too, and thus they silently pledged their friendship.

"You got gun?" the Indian inquired.

"I had one," was the answer, "but ding bast me if I know what they have done with it. Don't reckon I could find it, so we'd better git out an' leave it here."

"Yes, must git out. Now you listen me. You take dog in arms, mustn't let 'em see him walk; an' go right out camp to East—that way. There see guardsman. Go right up to him. He your friend Kingsley. He stop you, then let you go on. Other guard see it, he think all right. You go right on. Soon as out sight, go for home like fast can go. You see?"

"Yes, I ruther reckon I do," was the reply.

"What are you goin' ter do?"

"Me git out way come in; git horse for Kingsley; then me done."

"But, who are ye, Still Foot, and whar d'ye hang out when ye're ter home? It would be worth somethin' ter know more about ye."

"Me told not tell. Kingsley he tell you all he know when you see him. Come, we got go. Git hold dog, then start. Mind make no noise."

"Wal, I reckon thar ain't over a good deal o' time ter spare, so I'd better make a start. Come, Napoleon, let me git hold of ye ter carry ye, an' if ye so much as breathe out loud, by hokey I'll choke ye."

Napoleon was not a very large dog, and the old man took him up into his arms with ease. Then, the Indian having cut the slit in the side of the tent still larger, he stepped out and started off silently toward the eastern end of the camp as directed.

The Indian remained behind.

Old Riddles walked boldly, but with as little noise as possible, and in a few moments was beyond the camp.

In a few moments more he espied the guardsman, and walked on boldly as ever toward him.

Kingsley saw him at about the same time, and thought he recognized him, and on looking farther away to where the other guardsman was, saw that he, too, was looking to learn what was going on.

Kingsley stopped and waited for the old man to come up.

"I am glad to see you free," he said. "Where is the Indian?"

"He has gone out th' way he got in, an' said he would bring your hoss to you an' then his work would be done," was the reply.

"Well, you had better pass on, old friend, for the other watchman is on the lookout this way, and if you stay here too long he may suspect something."

"Right you are, my boy, an' I'll go on at once. Sorry that I couldn't git my weepins, but I s'pose I ought ter be thankful ter git off as well as I have."

The old man went right on, then, and the other watcher, seeing that he had passed the line all right, thought that nothing was wrong, and resumed his walk to and fro across the valley.

Kingsley continued his patrol duty for fully twenty minutes, and at the end of that time was wondering where his Indian friend could have gone to, when, on coming to the end of his beat on one turn, saw him standing there in the edge of the bushes.

He had robbed the dead man of his hat and jacket, and held them in his hands, ready to put them on.

"You go over once more," he said, "then when come back go right on into the bushes an' me step out and take place. Then you go right down valley, there find horse tied where you can find him. Take horse, go right home. Me take care self."

"All right," agreed Kingsley, and he started upon his last walk across.

When he came back he went right on into the bushes as directed, and the Indian, clad in the hat and jacket of the dead man, stepped out and took his place.

There was no chance for the man at the other end of the camp to suspect anything whatever of what was going on.

Kingsley hastened away down the valley, and about half a mile away came upon his horse, tied to a tree. Attached to the saddle, too, were the weapons that had been taken from Old Riddles that morning. The friendly Indian had not done his work by half, but had made a complete job of it.

The young man mounted immediately and rode away, keeping the horse at a walk until he had laid another half mile between him and the outlaw camp, when he increased its pace and hastened forward.

Old Riddles had kept to the main trail, and some time later Kingsley heard some one hail him.

He knew the voice at once; it was the old ranger.

"Hold on, sonny," the old man called out;

"where you goin' in sich haste? I would like ter talk some with ye."

"Come out and show yourself, then," was Kingsley's response, as he drew rein.

The old man came forth from the place where he had concealed himself on hearing the horse approaching.

"I never was so pesky lonesome in my life," he declared. "Here is Napoleon with me, ter be sure, but ding bast me if I have got a single weepin ter my name. You got one you kin lend me?"

"Yes, I guess so," Kingsley replied, and he handed the old man the very weapons that had been taken from him.

"Wal, ding bast my old hat!" the old man exclaimed, "if they ain't my own implements o' warfare, then I'm a heathen. Whar did yer git 'em?"

"That Indian got them for you and left them with my horse."

"Wal, he is a brick, an' that is gilt-edge truth."

"He has certainly done us a good turn."

"He has, fer a fact. What do you know about him?"

"Very little."

"Why, he told me ter come to you fer information."

"Then he has fooled you. I know nothing about him except that he was sent to help us by that person who has been playing the friend to us all along."

"Ha! that is somethin'. I would like ter know who that person is."

Thus they talked as they rode along, and they exchanged stories and compared notes.

In the mean time the Indian continued to play guardsman for about a quarter of an hour after the departure of Kingsley, and then he suddenly disappeared into the undergrowth, and the watcher at the other end of the camp saw him no more.

Half an hour passed, and the time came for the watch to be changed. The one guardsman went in, called the relief, and told that he had not seen the other man for some time. Nothing was thought of this, however, until the relief went out to where he had been stationed, and there found the man's body, cold in death.

In a few minutes the whole camp was in an uproar, and it was soon found that the Rocky Ranger had been spirited away.

The rage of Captain Red-hand scarcely knew bounds. He raved around like a wild man, swearing that the man should be recaptured, or he would hang every man in the band.

That did not help the matter any, however, and the enraged outlaw chief vowed that as soon as day dawned he would make a raid upon the party at the cabin and wipe them all out of existence—all except the young women.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

TOO LATE TO THE RESCUE.

MR. WOODLAND and the others who were besieged in the old cabin were certainly in a bad fix.

Death now stared them in the face.

True to their threat, the outlaws had, after several attempts, succeeded in firing the cabin.

Many shots had been fired out at them, but as it was firing in the dark, few took effect, except the two of which mention has been made, and they had not been fatal to the persons hit.

All the horses had been removed from behind the cabin, and were now tethered in another place, in order to give the rascals all the more room to work.

That done, the stable had been fired, and now the roof of the cabin was in a blaze.

It was a desperate situation.

Sniffin and Duff stood in their corners, the cold perspiration of terror running down their faces, and their legs so weak that they could hardly stand.

The others were decidedly pale, but there was a look of grim determination on each face that spoke of desperate courage within.

"What are we to do?" Mrs. Woodland asked, in a husky tone.

"We shall have to dash out and take our chances soon," was her husband's reply.

"And that will mean death," said Blanche Drayton.

"It may," Woodland acknowledged.

"I should say that now was the time for Mr. Sniffin and Mr. Duff to dash out and show us what they can do," suggested Miss Flint.

"Yes, you are right," agreed Miss DeVere. "If they care for us ladies, now is their time to prove it. As Goethe says: 'Now is—'"

"Never mind what Goethe says now," interrupted Woodland. "If he were here he might have something to say that would never stand being repeated."

"Sh—sh—shall we go forth?" asked the trembling Duff.

"We only await the order," declared Sniffin, in a weak and trembling voice.

"Yes, arm yourselves to the teeth," Woodland ordered, "for we can't stand it here much longer. The moment you get out and get a sight of one of the wretches, let him have it."

We may beat them off with little loss, unless they are too many for us. I suppose they will all be under cover, however, and ready to pick us off at sight."

Much of the courage displayed by the women was beginning to fade out now, and most of them were in tears.

By this time the roof was fairly on fire, and sparks were beginning to drop down into the inside.

Suddenly Blanche Drayton uttered a cry.

"What is this?" she demanded.

"Where—what?" inquired the others.

"Here, here in the floor."

They all looked, and there in the floor near where the young lady was standing was seen a trap-door. None of them had noticed it before, and perhaps they would not have found it now, had not the idea come to the girl to look for it, thinking that possibly there might be something of the kind. Aided by the light from the fire in the roof, she had been fortunate enough to discover it.

"It is a trap-door!" exclaimed Woodland. "This may prove the means of our escape. Give me the ax, Duff, and I will open it."

There was no ring in the door, nor any other means of lifting it, but with the ax Woodland soon had it open.

Under it was revealed a deep, dark hole. It could not be called a cellar, for it was not large enough. It was more like a good-sized well.

Lighting a match and throwing it down, Woodland found that it was about ten feet deep, and also made the discovery that there was a side chamber or tunnel at the bottom.

With no delay he let himself over the edge and dropped down.

The moment he was at the bottom he lighted another match, and found that the side chamber was indeed a tunnel, and that it led away as far as he could see.

"We are saved!" he exclaimed. "Hand down all the arms and ammunition, and all else that we want to save, and drop down here. It is not very far, and you will not get hurt. There is not a moment to lose."

Those above began to obey, and the blazing roof gave them all the light they could wish for, and more.

Quickly all the arms and ammunition were passed down, as well as everything in the way of provisions that was at hand, and then the ladies and the other men followed.

They were none too soon, for barely had they started forward in the tunnel when the roof began to fall in, and the outlaws without were shouting themselves hoarse in exultation.

"Yell, you devils!" grated Woodland, "we are safe from you for the present, at any rate."

Indeed they were, for they found the tunnel quite long, and it was some time before they came to the end of it.

When they finally did come to the end, they found themselves in a very narrow canyon, in which flowed the stream that ran along behind the cabin.

"Saved!" exclaimed Woodland, "saved! They can never find us here, unless they discover the tunnel and follow it, and if they do that we will give them such a hot reception at this end that they will wish they had never interfered with us."

"You are right we will," boasted Sniffin and Duff. "We will whip them out of their boots. It is too bad that they did not break in the door of the cabin, so that we could show them just what sort of fighters we are."

"Please do not say anything more about that," requested Miss Flint, "for you weary us."

They could not see the cabin from where they were, but they could see some of the reflection of the fire, and could hear the yelling of the outlaws.

What the outlaws thought, can only be imagined. By this time the whole cabin was ablaze, and not a sign had been seen of the persons it had contained. It was certain that they had not come out, and the only other thing to think was that they had been overcome by the smoke, and were dead.

Suddenly the shouts and yells took another tune, and a volley of rifle-shots was heard.

"What can that mean?" questioned Blanche Drayton.

"It means that some one has attacked them," replied Woodland.

"Who can it be?"

"I cannot say, unless it is Kingsley, with some help that he has obtained."

"Or our mysterious friends of the mountains," suggested Mrs. Woodland.

Whoever it was, they certainly meant business, for shot after shot rung out upon the night-air, and more than once the death-yell of some human was heard.

This lasted for several minutes, and then all was still.

"It has been settled, one way or the other," said Woodland.

"Grant that it may be in our favor," observed Miss DeVere, fervently. "As Wieland says. 'Now—'"

"Don't for goodness' sake pester us with any

of your Dutchman's lingo now," interrupted Woodland. "We have other things to think about."

Old Riddles and Philip Kingsley had hurried on toward the old cabin, from the point where we last saw them, for they expected to find trouble there, knowing that five men had set out from the outlaw camp to attack the cabin.

When they came out into the valley where the cabin was situated, and the light of the fire could be seen, they knew that something had taken place, and they feared the worst.

"Ding bast their hides!" cried the old ranger, "I do believe they have set fire to th' cabin, an' if they have I reckon it is all up with th' folks there."

"I hope it is not so," said Kingsley, his face blanching at the idea, "but I fear the worst. Let us hasten on with all speed."

"Let me git up behind you on th' hoss, the old man requested, "and then you kin make th' animile git fer all it's wu'th."

It required but a second for him to mount, and away they went, to render whatever assistance they could.

When they came to the bend in the valley, they saw that the cabin was all on fire, and that the horses had been removed, preparatory to taking them away. Four of the five outlaws were dancing around like so many hostile Indians, one of them having his arm in a sling. The fifth man was near the horses, nursing a wounded leg.

"Ding bast their homely mugs!" the old ranger cried, "they have fired th' cabin fer sure, an' th' chances is that our friends is dead. Stop, Kingsley, an' let us dismount, an' then if we don't give them all they want my name ain't Old Zeb Horn."

Down they got, and the old man directed what was to be done.

"Fasten th' hoss here," he advised, "an' then you go up this side an' I'll go up th' other. Then when we get up thar whar they are, we will open on 'em. Not one of 'em kin git away. They won't have th' ghost of a chance. We will pay 'em up; ding bast 'em!"

With all possible haste they advanced, and in a very short time were opposite to the place where the outlaws were dancing around.

The old ranger was the first to fire, and his shot took effect on the man who was holding, or watching, the horses. He had no intention of allowing them to be started away.

This was the signal for Kingsley to shoot, and he did so, bringing down one of the four.

The other three turned and began to shoot rapidly at random, and for some moments it was lively work. Kingsley and the old ranger, however, soon picked them off, and the battle was won.

Knowing, from the fact that there had only five men set out from the camp, that all were now dead, the old ranger ran out and hastened to the cabin. He wanted to learn the fate of his friends.

By this time the whole structure was in flames, and if the people were inside they were certainly dead. And the still-fastened door went to show that they were there.

"They must be dead," said Kingsley, when he joined him.

"Yes, that is what I fear," answered the old man, sorrowfully. "Ye see th' door is fast yet, an' there is no other way out that I know of."

Tears were in the eyes of both, but they tried to bear up.

"Here," said the old man, "catch hold of this pole with me, and we will force the door."

It was the one the outlaws had used for the same purpose.

They took it up and made a dash against the door, and it being now weakened by the fire, their first blow carried it away.

The cabin was empty of human beings.

"Gone!" the old ranger announced.

"Yes," agreed Kingsley, "gone!"

And then, as he caught sight of the hole in the floor, he added:

"And that is the way they went," drawing the old man's attention to the trap-door, of which they had never known the existence.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE MYSTERIOUS FRIENDS.

"WHERE can that hole lead to?" questioned Kingsley.

"I give it up, young man," was the old ranger's reply. "One thing is sartain, though, if they are down there they must be smothered by this time."

"Horror! they must be rescued. I will rush in and see if they are there. If they are, they must be got out!"

As he spoke, the young man made a dash with the intention of running right into the fiery trap, which would have been certain death to him, but the old man held him back.

"Don't ye do it," he advised. "I don't want ter see you roasted, too."

"Let me go!" Kingsley ordered, as he tried to break away.

"Nary a let go," said the old man, firmly, and exerting his strength he held the younger man without trouble.

The next moment the floor of the old cabin fell, and one side caved in, sending a great shower of sparks flying toward the sky.

"D'ye see whar ye would ha' been?" Old Riddles demanded.

"I almost wish that it were so," was the response.

Kingsley was thinking of the pretty face and winning manner of Blanche Drayton.

They could do nothing until the fire was out, so they turned their attention to the horses and took measures to make them secure, after which they laid the bodies of the dead outlaws in a heap ready for burial later on. It was one of Old Riddles's rules of life that he never left a body unburied, no matter how great a foe the man had been to him in life.

In the mean time Woodland and those with him had become so anxious to learn what had been going on at the cabin, that they had ventured to find their way out of the canyon.

That is to say, Woodland himself had made the venture, leaving the others to guard the end of the tunnel.

He had some little trouble in getting out, but at last he found the way, and when he came out where he could see the cabin he was agreeably surprised to find Old Riddles and Kingsley standing there in the light of the fire.

"Hello, there!" he called out.

Kingsley and the old ranger looked quickly up, and when they saw Woodland on the side of the hill a little way above, they waved their hats and shouted for joy.

"Are all of you safe?" inquired Kingsley.

"Yes, all safe, thank the good Master," answered Woodland. "Was it you whom we heard firing?"

"It sartainly was," declared the ranger, "an' thar is what we war firin' at, too," pointing at the bodies of the outlaws.

"Did you get them all?"

"We sartainly did."

"That is good. Stay there a few minutes, and I will go and bring the others out of their hiding-place."

Woodland disappeared, and in due time all were assembled around the dying fire where the cabin had lately stood.

"Where are Priestly and Kendrick?" inquired Kingsley, the moment he saw they were not with the others.

The story of their disappearance was soon told.

"What did I tell ye?" demanded the old ranger. "Them p'izen critters has got up an' dusted out, an' ten to one they expect ter git hold o' thar treasure afore we kin find it, an' then they will bid us adieu. That is their leetle game, if they kin carry it out. I don't want ter wish 'em bad luck, but if th' outlaws will capture 'em I shan't feel more'n a heap sorry fur 'em."

Experiences were exchanged all around, and the next thing to do then was to go into a new camp.

It was almost certain that there would be still another attack made upon them on the following night at the latest, and they must be prepared for it.

The place where the cabin had stood was the best one they could find for the purpose, for it could be attacked from only one way, and there they had plenty of water. This place was settled upon, and then Old Riddles set to work, the other men helping him, to build a breast-work of stone across the open.

They had brought the horses within, first, and had arranged a place for the women to sleep, and for the rest of the night they worked like beavers.

When morning dawned they had a barricade of stone across from one side to the other higher than their heads, and in it numerous holes through which to fire at an enemy without. On the outside they had placed brush, so that none of these holes could be seen to invite sharp-shooting.

"Thar," the Rocky ranger cried, as he flung himself down upon the ground, completely tired out, "now let 'em come, an' if we don't give 'em fits then I don't know what fits is."

"We will certainly try to make it interesting for them," Kingsley agreed, "and the sooner it is over the better."

Another horse had to be killed to supply them with food, and after a hearty breakfast they all felt much better and more like engaging in another battle.

In one corner of the little arm of the valley an inner barricade was then made for the accommodation of the ladies, and they were told that in case of fighting they must not under any circumstances come out from behind it.

Scarcely had that been made when a party of horsemen dashed into the valley, and came charging down upon them at full-speed.

They came about half way from the bend to the site of the cabin, and there halted.

They were Captain Red-hand and his band. The bodies of their comrades had not yet been buried, and it took them only a few moments to discover them.

A howl of rage went up instantly, and a vol-

ley of shots was fired at the stone barricade, not one of them doing the slightest harm.

It was clearly evident that this was to be the finishing stroke, and that the matter would be decided one way or the other.

The outlaws dismounted, and one came forward with a white rag in hand, evidently desiring to parley a little.

When he came to good speaking distance, Old Riddles called out:

"Thar, critter, stop right whar ye are. You are close enough. What do you want?"

"Captain Red-hand calls upon you to surrender, and that at once. If you don't he will kill every one of you."

"Tell him to come right on and begin, then," was the return, "for we have no idee that we will surrender."

"That settles it then, and you will soon be laid out as cold as our poor pards cut thar, wimmin and all."

"Talk is cheap," Kingsley shouted back; "let's see what you can do to back it up."

The man went back to the band, and it could be seen that they were preparing for the fight.

They outnumbered the defenders more than two to one, but the latter had every advantage of position.

In a few minutes they rushed forward to the attack, evidently intending to run right over the barrier and engage the defenders in a hand-to-hand fight. And they fired as they came.

Old Riddles waited until they were pretty close, and then he gave the order to fire.

The order was obeyed, and four of the rascals bit the dust. This was too much for the others, and they rushed to cover as quickly as they could.

For a time then the firing was kept up, without any damage being done to either party.

In a little while another attack was decided upon, and the outlaws rushed out once more, this time in a scattered manner, and at the first fire only one of them fell. Oh they came, and then suddenly two of them were seen to throw up their arms and drop. No reports had been heard, but the mystery was soon made plain, for in the back of each was buried an arrow.

In a moment more two more fell in the same manner, and another volley from the barricade brought down five of them.

This rendered the others terror-stricken, and they ran around like crazy men, the weapons of the old ranger and the arrows of the unseen friends picking them off without mercy.

Captain Red-hand and the others who remained alive made a dash for their horses, but by the time they had reached them only the captain and two men were alive.

It was a victory complete for the old ranger and his friends.

One of the men was tumbled out of the saddle even as he was starting away, and in the next moment two Indians rushed out from the rocks and bushes and took the captain and his remaining man prisoners.

Their weapons being empty, and the Indians being armed with revolvers, they had to surrender or die, and they surrendered.

The two Indians, noble-looking fellows, both of them, led them forward to the stone barricade, and there delivered them to the old ranger.

One of the Indians was Still Foot, whose acquaintance the old ranger had already made.

The mask was torn from the captain's face, and he was found to be a man of thirty-five or thereabouts, and rather good-looking. His companion was a brutish-looking fellow.

While they were being bound, another personage appeared upon the scene. This was a woman. She came dashing down the valley, mounted upon a superb horse, and made a daringly sudden stop right at the barricade.

She was about thirty years of age, and while not by any means handsome, had a noble face, and was of queenly appearance as she sat there on her horse.

She saluted with a bow and wave of the hand, and said:

"My friends, I am happy to see you out of danger. You will have no more trouble with the outlaws, because they are all dead save these two, for I have put an end to two who were left at their camp. This Captain Red-hand was once an honest and honored man, and I was his happy wife. He turned out bad, deserted me, and I have been on his track for many a day, foiling him in his deeds of evil wherever I could do so. I am the person who has been giving you warnings and advice from time to time. Now I have a request to make. It is this: Will you turn this man over to me? I will dispose of the other thus," drawing a revolver and shooting the wretch as she spoke; "and unless you do grant me the favor I will dispose of the other in the same manner. What do you say?"

"Let her kill me," the outlaw chief requested, "but do not let me fall into her hands."

"Say quick what you will do," the woman demanded, her revolver ready for action.

It was soon decided—decided that she should have him, and he was delivered to her. She ordered the Indians to bind him, which was quick-

ly done, and he was placed on his own horse, the Indians taking horses too, and bidding farewell to our friends, the mysterious woman rode away, the Indians following her with the prisoner, and none of the four were ever heard of again.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

HAPPY ENDING.

WE have enough material in hand to make this a story of double length, but lack of time and space forbids.

Our friends gazed after the mysterious woman and her strange companions until they passed from sight, and turned their attention then to things which more immediately concerned them.

Among the dead was found Walden Terrill; and also Dave Warden, or "Utah Dave," the traitor guide. They had deserved the fate that had overtaken them. On the person of Terrill was found the paper which he had discovered between the two stones at the place where he had found the skeleton of Horace Drayton. Of this Kingsley took possession.

The bodies of the outlaws were all buried in one common grave, for as they had lived so had they died, and there was none to honor their memory.

As soon as the dead had been decently buried, our friends left that valley and went over to the one so lately occupied by the outlaws, where they took possession of everything, and made that their headquarters. Here they found sufficient provisions of all necessary kinds to last them for a long time.

They rested for the remainder of that day, and on the day following set out upon the search for the lost treasure with renewed hope. Having now the map, as well as the other papers, they could work more intelligently than before.

Following the directions to the letter, they were not many hours in finding the rock of the cross, and from that point were soon able to come to the hiding-place of the treasure.

The treasure was indeed an immense one, and was finally found to be worth nearly a quarter million of dollars. It consisted of gold and silver money, jewels and jewelry, and a great deal of church-furnishings of silver and gold.

The dying ex-priest had told no lie.

The treasure was all taken to the camp, and there it was packed for transportation. Afterward, all that part of it which had been stolen from churches, as near as could be decided, was presented to various charitable enterprises. The remainder was retained by Miss Drayton, except what was rightfully due to Philip Kingsley, which she insisted upon his accepting; and the godly sums which she presented to other friends, of whom Old Riddles was one.

When the treasure had been packed, and they had spent several more restful days in their pleasant camp, they started on toward the south under the guidance of the old ranger.

They had not been many days upon their journey when they came one day upon two of the most wretched and woeful mortals they had ever seen. They were lean and starved, and about used up. The names of these miserable creatures were—Eugene Priestly and Major Arlington Kendrick.

"Hello, deserters," the old ranger hailed them, "how d'ye fare?"

"No need to answer that question," returned Priestly; "our appearance is all that is needed to tell you that. But we deny the charge that we are deserters."

"What!" cried the old man, "ye deny it?"

"We certainly do," affirmed Kendrick.

The old ranger laughed.

"I'd like ter believe ye," he said, "but hang me if I do. Are ye willin' ter swear ter th' truth o' what ye say?"

"Yes," declared Priestly, "we are."

"Then, by hokey, I'll swear ye," the old man vowed, and down into his pocket he went, and brought up his *vade mecum*—his book of riddles.

As it happened, neither of the two men had ever seen his book, and of course they took it to be the Book of books.

"Place yer hands on here," Old Zeb directed, and the two rascals rather reluctantly obeyed. "Now," he added, "repeat after me: On this haur sacred book we sw'ar that we did not desert, but that we went off on our own hooks ter try and find th' hidden treasure and git away with it—Why don't ye repeat?"

They had come to a sudden stop.

"That wasn't the way of it at all," Priestly averred. "We were lured out of the camp, and we lost our way. We couldn't find our way back again."

"Will ye sw'ar ter that?" Old Zeb asked.

Both declared their willingness to do so, but when it came right down to it, they backed out. They were weak and almost sick, and had not the stamina to carry out their idea, so they broke down and confessed, and begged to be taken care of.

They were allowed to remain in the party, but at the very first town they came to they were left, and were not heard from again.

Honesty is the best policy at all times and under any circumstances.

In due time they arrived at Santa Fe, where they parted company with Old Riddles.

"Good-by," said the old man, at parting, "an' I hope that we'll all meet in that better land one o' these days. This heur is a troublesome world ter live in, at th' best. I am gittin' old, an' I kin see what a useless career I have had, unless thar is somethin' better ter come by an by. Wal, good-by, an' take keer o' yerselves. Me an' Napoleon heur will git back inter th' hills, whar we expect ter end our days. Kingsley, I like you ternel well. I do, by hokey, an' if ye ever git out ter this part o' th' world ag'in, an' I am in th' land o' th' livin', don't fail ter hunt me up. And," this in confidence, "don't ye fail ter marry that purty gal. I don't mean th' one that is all th' time spoutin' poultry, but th' other one."

"I intend to do so, if she will have me," Kingsley assured.

"Bully fer you!" the old man cried. "Wal, I will shake all hands around, an' then we'll part. Thar, an' now once more—good-by. Say, Napoleon, ding bast yer old hide, what be ye lookin' so sad about? Ye make me feel sad, too. Come, we'll slink off ter some quiet place an' take a dose o' riddles, jest as quick as we kin. Come on."

So the old ranger parted from them, and Kingsley felt that he had lost a good friend.

Sniffin and Duff, too, parted from the others there, and Kingsley and Woodland, with the ladies, set out for the East.

We have forgotten to mention that the bones of Horace Drayton had been brought along. They were finally laid to rest beside those of the faithful wife who had so long waited for his return, only to die in despair at last.

The story is told.

About a year after the time of the events we have recorded, Philip Kingsley and Blanche Drayton were made man and wife.

It had been a true case of love at first sight with both of them.

The Woodlands visited Europe the next year, but they had no such adventures there as they could boast of having had at home.

Miss De Vere is still with them, as she is likely to be. She would willingly marry some good and honorable man, but she has as yet failed to get one sufficiently well-hooked to land him. She still dotes on German literature, and almost her last words when parting with Blanche and her husband, after a recent visit to their happy home, was a selection from Wieland—"dear Wieland, celebrated at home, but so little known to the English, you know"—as follows:

"And see the moon admire her image still,
In many a lake that calm beneath her sleeps."

One more item that is worthy of record, and we shall have done.

Kingsley and his wife were one day surprised beyond degree to see Old Zeb Horn and his dog walking up the pathway that leads from the road to their house. He remained many weeks, until finally, on the strength of a little agreement with Miss Deborah Flint, he decided to settle down there and make it his home. The pair were the happiest old couple that can be found. Deborah says that Zeb is the only man she ever knew that didn't make a soft fool of himself; while he declares that she is the only woman in the world that can boast of real "hoss" sense.

So we take our leave of our old hero, leaving him happy in the company of his wife, his dog, and his book of riddles.

THE END.

Beadle's Half-Dime Library.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE.

- 67 Patent-Leather Joe; or, Old Rattlesnake, the Charmer.
- 175 Captain Arizona; or, Patent-Leather Joe's Big Game.
- 193 Captain Mask; or, Patent-Leather Joe's Defeat.
- 219 Despard, the Duellist; or, The Mountain Vampires.
- 338 A Tough Boy; or, The Dwarf's Revenge.
- 363 Little Tornado; or, The Outcasts of the Glen.
- 373 Little Jingo; or, the Queer Pard.
- 388 Little Oh-my; or, Caught in His Own Trap.
- 401 Little Shoo-Fly; or, A Race for a Ranch.
- 408 Little Leather-Breeches; or, Old Jumbo's Curse.
- 431 Little Ah Sin; or, The Curse of Blood.
- 451 Colorado Kate. A Tale of the alines.
- 480 Three Jolly Pards.
- 517 Jim Gladden's Deputy.
- 527 The Jolly Pards to the Rescue.
- 547 Sandy Andy; or, A Good Man Down.
- 556 Lariat Lil; or, The Cast for a Life.

BY CAPTAIN FRED. WHITTAKER.

- 15 The Sea-Cat; or, The Witch of Darien.
- 29 The Dumb Page; or, The Doge's Daughter.
- 48 Dick Darling, the Pony Express Rider.
- 150 Lance and Lasso; or, The Children of the Chaco.
- 154 The Sword Hunters; or, The Land of the Elephant Riders.
- 159 The Lost Captain; or, Skipper Jabez Coffin's Cruise to the Open Polar Sea.
- 200 The Boy Bedouins; or, The Brothers of the Plumed Lance.
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